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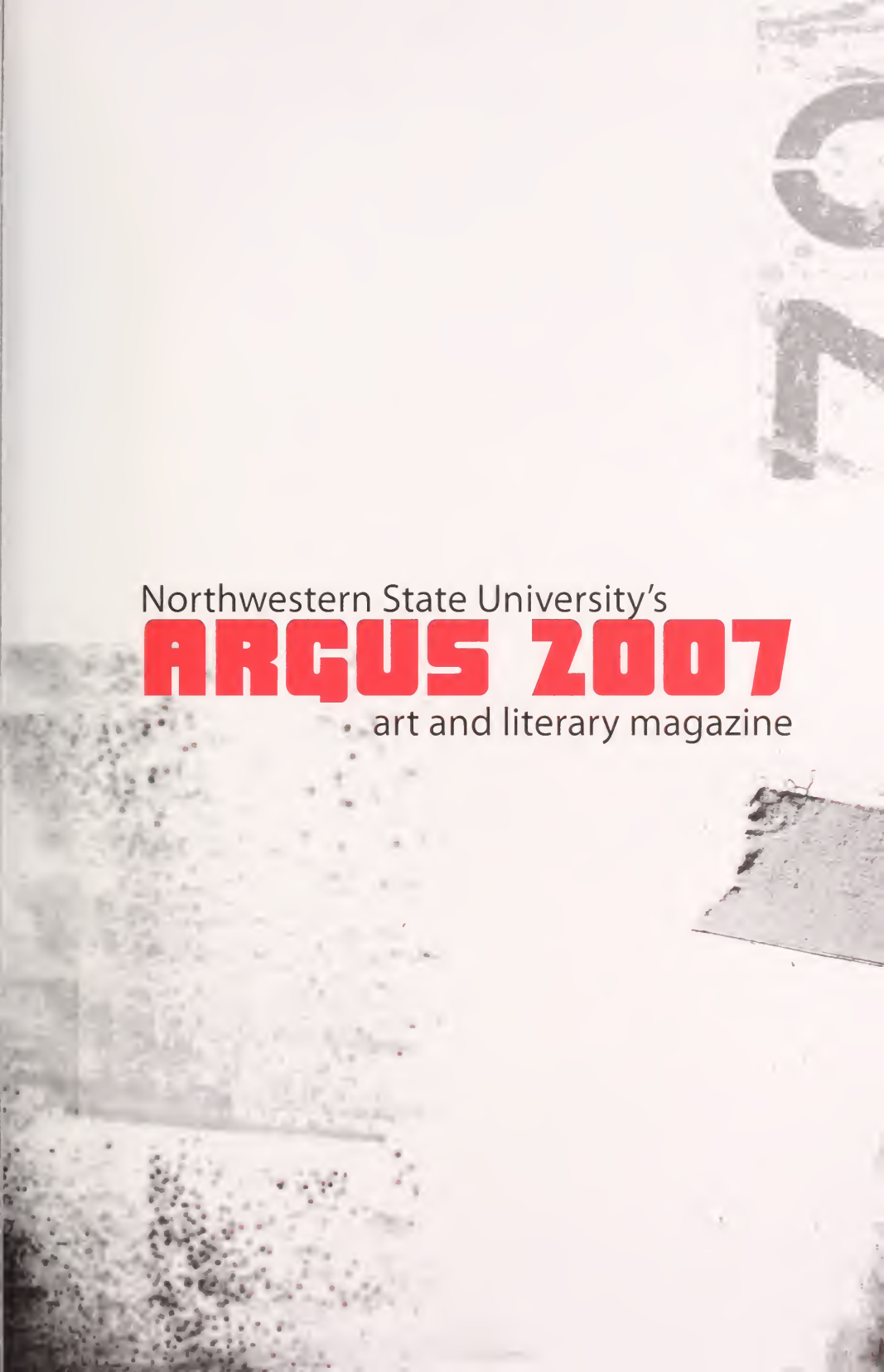
NSU ARGUS 2007





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Northwestern State University's

ARGUS 2007

• art and literary magazine

Just as a painting begins as an empty canvas and a literary masterpiece begins as a blank page, Argus begins as 120 intimidating pages. The joy of serving as editor of Argus is being able to see how these stark-white pages develop into a publication that represents the best writers and artists at NSU. Each year, Argus gives students the opportunity to declare themselves through literary and artistic media, and the Argus staff strives to showcase these students' declarations as best as possible. This year, I wanted to create a magazine that is as bold as the writers and artists featured within it. As you venture through this edition of Argus, I encourage you to try to look at life with a new perspective. Try and see the world through the eyes of these authors and artists. I hope that the words and images that fill these pages will inspire you to do what all of these entries do so well: DECLARE.

Michael James Griffin II

By not requiring works to fit into a specific theme, it becomes the editorial staff's job, among many, to invoke and trace out the lines of a pattern for the book to become a whole. What our team arrived at may, in fact, be far from unity and more about a search for it. If you look at each of the literary pieces of this year's Argus as a story, you will see the unfolding of a glorious relationship between the divided self.

We start off with a journey and a realization that to embark on this haphazard route is to tread caution and to tread lightly. We encounter along the way various trials including evil, a partner, and a decision. Discordant strands of our identity are fused into one when the realization occurs that what completes us is an other. Fearing failure, we begin to look for an easy way out because we realize the tumultuous journey ahead is just that—difficult. The realization that life is hard and unfair, memories are often forgotten, and that individuality is trounced upon frequently becomes a coda in the penultimate sections. Reaching the far shore of peace and completion, we finally understand that what lies ahead, life/death/experience, is not something that we have not actually started but a part of what we have always been participating in—a never-ending adventure.

Larrie King

DESIGNER'S NOTE

When someone makes a declaration—of self, of pride, of change, it is strong, unwavering, and definite. This book is made up of people who have something to say, but just as each page in this book is different, so are the authors and artists involved. Some assume that the strength of a declaration and that of the declarer are the same, but I have recognized the often indelicate metamorphosis we go through in order to declare anything. Through the design of this book, I am hopeful that I have captured the broken and tarnished qualities of our lives, but only so that the beauty may shine through more radiantly. We have all been broken, torn, and taped back together. Through our writing and our art, may we be repaired.

ARGUS 2007

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Disclaimer: The ideas and opinions either expressed or implied are not necessarily those of the editorial staff of Argus, nor of the administration or staff of Northwestern State University.

Art and Literary **CONTEST WINNERS**



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ABOUT THE JUDGES

Art

Leslie Gregory Gruesbeck is the coordinator of gallery activities for the Hanchey Gallery spaces, the Department of Fine and Graphic Arts, and the Department of Creative and Performing Arts at NSU. Gruesbeck served as the editor of *Argus* from 1985-1986.

W. Anthony Watkins is an Assistant Professor at NSU. He earned his MFA from the University of Tennessee; his work has been recognized by *HOW* magazine as well as *Graphic Design USA*, *MacroMedia.com*, and *Time* magazine online.

Photography

John C. Guillet has owned his own photography studio in Natchitoches for 55 years. He has photo illustrated six books including *Cane River Cuisine* and *Cane River's Louisiana Living*. While attending NSU from 1945-1949, Guillet served as a university photographer.

Mike Silva studied photojournalism at Stephen F. Austin State University. He started working at *The Shreveport Times* in 1980 and left in 1994 to be photo editor at *The Jackson Sun* in Jackson, Tennessee. He spent the next five years there, but then returned to *The Shreveport Times* in 1999 to be photo editor there.

Poetry

Dr. Skip Fox has been teaching creative writing at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, for over 25 years and has two full-length books of poetry as well as four chapbooks. Fox earned his Ph.D from Bowling Green State University.

Kay Murphy is a professor of English at the University of New Orleans where she teaches poetry in both undergraduate and graduate workshops. She is the author of two collections of poem, *The Autopsy* and *Belief Blues*. She is the poetry editor of *Bayou*.

Alison Pelegrin's second collection, *Big Muddy River of Stars*, won the Akron poetry prize and is forthcoming from the University of Akron Press in the fall of 2007. She is also the author of *The Zydeco Tablets* and three prize-winning chapbooks. She has received fellowships from the Louisiana Division of the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Fiction

Dr. Joseph “Rocky” Colavito received his Ph.D from the University of Arizona. A thirteen-year member of the Department of Language and Communication, he teaches a wide spectrum of classes from first-year writing to graduate seminars in film studies. He is currently editor of the Louisiana English Journal, the annual scholarly forum for the Louisiana Council of Teachers of English.

Dr. Matthew Dube teaches creative writing at William Woods University in Fulton, Missouri. His stories have appeared in GulfCoast, Bridge Magazine, Iconoclast, and elsewhere. Dube completed his Ph.D in English literature at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette.

Jennifer Gravley resides in Columbia, Missouri, and earned an MFA from the University of Alabama. Her stories have appeared recently in Ellipsis, Redivider, 21 Stars Review, and Triplopia.

Creative Nonfiction

Maeve Adams is a doctoral candidate in the English Department at New York University. Her work investigates genre formation, intellectual history, realism, and conceptions of “evidence” in and after the Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She completed her Bachelor’s degree at Smith College and a Master’s degree at the University of Kent, Canterbury, in England.

Dr. Randolph Bates is author of *Rings: On the Life and Family of a Southern Fighter* and his periodical publications include Grand Street, Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, and others. He has been awarded creative writing fellowships by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Louisiana Division of the Arts. He teaches nonfiction writing at the University of New Orleans, where he is nonfiction editor of Bayou.

Poet and essayist **Patrice Melnick** recently moved from New Orleans to Grand Coteau, Louisiana. She has published a collection of personal narratives and poems entitled *Turning Up the Volume*. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and teaches an MFA creative nonfiction workshop at the University of New Orleans.

Special thanks to:

Dr. Julie Kane; Dr. Lisa Abney and the Department of Language and Communication; Dr. Roger Chandler and the Department of Fine and Graphic Arts; Dr. Nate Pritts; Peggy Cedars; Bobbie Jackson; Gary Hardamon; Jeff Mathews; Jennifer Anderson; The Current Sauce; Potpourri; KNWD; Beth Ross; and Dawayna Sanders.

I AM

Robert Tummons

a passing glimmer
the afterimage of a blink
the remains of a shadow at dusk

little more than a freckle
not worthy of a double-take
past the point of remembrance

the reflection of air
lack of action
vanished without thought

beyond your imagination
vacant to the mind's eye
pure of all being

the lighter for fireworks
sweetener in your lemonade
the gas in the engine

the future of writing
the glint of hope
the edge of imagination

probably the best
that you will never
get to know

Because I am

a passing glimmer
not worthy of a double-take
vanished without thought



RANDOM THOUGHTS ON THE INTERSTATE

Nicole Vasquez

Bruises and bloodstains
Should not be your life pains.
Why did you take it so far?

I don't think I can pity you,
Only because that's what you want. [Dude, your blinker]

I'm writing with the rain,
Going seventy-five. [These wipers go too fast]

Why do we sleep to the rain
But wake by the thunder?

It's Halloween and it's hot as hell;
I think it's a sign we're doing well.

I'm stingy with my feelings
Because it's never enough. [I love cruise control]

I hate to intrude the melancholy
With such an unsatisfying start.

If I don't see you are you still there?
Your light is here
But you are nowhere. [Get your brights out of my face]

Why does nowhere spell now here?
Is it self-answering?

My eyes are getting heavy;
These drives are gonna kill me.

I see everything as it should be,
But then I open my eyes and
Realize they were closed.
That scares me more than anything. [When did I change lanes?]

The words seem so powerful in my head,
But when I write them, they seem dead.
Should I stop and keep them in? [I just wanna get home.]

SINISTER

Ryan Reid

One hundred million fetishes erupt,
frothing, curdling from the corners of a thin, toothy smile
curled behind fat, greasy lips where liess
the endpoint for both food and souls
as the owner of the cavern gluts on
the unfortunates who naively listened
to his whispers and repays in sickening
trade those who blindly followed
the march set into motion by the off-time
beat of his huge, skin-leathered kettle drum
played by a wicked and disgusting taskmaster
that sweats only in patches so the condemned
may be maddened by the grinding and pulsating
of his immense form—both muscled and gorged;
matted and bald; pale and black—
as it slithers roughly against their own bodies
as they are penetrated,
clawed,
licked,
sucked,
rubbed,
pulled,
bitten,
cut,
gutted,
drained,
and swallowed whole
while trying to scream a muffled scream
and sliding down the slick gullet
of a handsome monster with many names
and even more faces to whom the ignorant
bow with unknowing reverence,
slurping their addictions from his bulging, dark veins,
pumping with poison to and from no heart
within a barrel chest that rhythmically pounds with each beat
a tune that beckons more to suck their deaths
from and unto his self, suckling like piglets,
drinking pain as sweet milk from their sow mothers' tits,
causing him to laugh at the sad irony:
pigs line up to the slaughter,
striving to get closer to the end,
and the damned are no different.



UNTITLED NO. 1

bj hocke



SHAME

Graham Harvey

I stood upon my rooftop
and gazed on the world—
my eyes, bloodshot red.

Below me stood the bankrupt,
drifting boys and girls—
the ones for whom we bled.

I paused and kneeled and jumped.
I landed alongside Joe—
a boy of pallid pitch.

To Joe, I then inquired
of future, nation, soul—
how to remedy our itch.

“I don’t know,” he said.
“and I honestly don’t care”—
so proud and so aloof.

I turned my back, disgusted.
I wished I weren’t there—
so I climbed back on my roof.

LOST FOR NOW

Theresa Dollman

Driving down this dusty road
I get smoke in my eyes
Now I can't see just where I'm going
Why must I get so high?

Misconnections
No directions
Plus I'm driving fast as hell
Only heaven knows where I've been
And you know I don't believe in that veil

Who's gonna save me now?
Now that I've pissed all of y'all off around
That's why I'm driving straight
Out
Of this town

The truth hurts

Holy crap! I threw out the map
And I lost my fucking phone
One hundred miles per hour highway
You shoulda seen the shit explode

Do you smell bacon?
Did I hear sirens?
They're gonna lock me up for sure
What to do with one phone call and all my bridges burned

Never ever say you hate your fuckin' friends
Cause you'll never know a day when you'll need one of them

The truth hurts

FIRST FALL BREEZE

Mary Beth Widhalm

You swept through
my ribs like branches
plucking away my own dead leaves,
breathing movement through
my thick and heavy heart,
twisting and whispering
of exotic lands and uncharted seas.

A hundred other winds
breathed and died
and curled themselves around my body
but none that smelled like summer and like winter
with such lingering.

Winter did come,
and I wanted nothing but to wrap myself in you
and sleep and sleep,
but the whispers echoed through my mind.
Your words, your words;
they are written behind my eyes.
I tried to give them back—
to plant them in the green ground,
to toss them to the blue sky,
but they keep coming back to me—
two shades of the same color.



THE FLUFF

Lisa Rachal



WHITE HOUSES

Lora Sheppard

Her older sister had a dating problem, Jenna Holmes decided, as she watched Penelope ease the front door to their parents' house open quietly—as if she meant to sneak in—and neatly dodge the suitcase Jenna had left near the door. Coffee filter in hand, Jenna pushed her glasses up her nose with a finger before propping a hand on her hip and tilting her head.

“Bad date?”

Nell jumped in surprise as if shot, dropping her keys with a clatter and looking up with red-rimmed bright-hazel eyes, a stark contrast against her olive-toned skin and dark brown hair. “Why do you do that?” she snapped in reflex before blinking, as if she was not quite sure if she was dreaming or awake. “You’re early!”

Jenna smirked, her tone wry. “Boss-man let me go two days ago. Managed to get an earlier flight to be back for the Holmes’s annual Fourth of July barbeque.” She tilted her head in the opposite direction, scratching at the strip of skin above her pajama pants.

“Coffee?”

“Doesn’t air travel make you sleepy?”

She shook her head. “Any travel gets the creativity moving—new places and all that crap. Coffee?”

Nell gave her a skeptical look, as Jenna sat with her laptop open on the table and all of her notes and reference material spread over the rest of the surface like a fan. She reached for her tea and moved to boil water. “Pass.”

Jenna, a little off-put by her older sister’s lack of enthusiasm, sighed and turned back to the coffee machine, putting the grinds in and switching it on, suddenly tired. “So what happened this time?”

Nell sighed, finally speaking after a moment of gathering her thoughts, a hint of defeat

in her posture. "I met this guy through Christine," she said, naming her closest friend.

"He's smart, charming, great eyes, hot body . . ." she trailed off.

"And?" Jenna prompted.

Nell mumbled into her cup, staring at anything but her sister.

"Huh?"

"He. Said. He. Was. Darth. Vader." Nell enunciated. "Reincarnated," she specified, as if it made a difference.

There was complete silence following her explanation. Nothing but the clock ticking away above the kitchen sink, and a random noise from one of the two cats their parents owned. Nell looked surprised, as if she expected a snicker at the least, a biting wise-assed comment at worst. The air conditioning kicked on with a humming sound.

"Really?" Jenna asked, voice choked, eyes too merry for four in the morning. "Did he sound like James Earl Jones?"

Nell glared at her hotly enough to strip paint. "No. He sounded like a jackass."

"Oh, that reminds me—how's Lily?"

Nell snorted, her irritation towards Jenna fading somewhat at the jibe to their younger sister Lillian. "On a date. At least someone's having fun. She's probably drunk by now."

"Maybe she'll come home with a tattoo."

Nell grinned. "Maybe it'll say 'Virgin.'"

Jenna shook her head, trying to keep a straight face. "False advertising."

Nell laughed outright, covering her mouth to stop the laughter. "We are so mean. You know she's nowhere near that bad. The flirt."

"Yeah, well, she's a brat. Now that it's actually legal for her to drink, we have to deal with her coming home plastered at 6:00 A.M."

Nell sniffed, wiping away a phantom tear. "Our senior-year nursing student. We're so proud!"

Jenna rubbed her eyes, suddenly looking wan despite the amused smirk on her face. "So, Darth Vader, huh?" she commented, rising to pour her coffee and stirring in milk and a liberal amount of sugar. She fixed Nell's tea and brought both cups to the table.

She groaned, resting her forehead on the table, accepting her cup with a relieved sigh. "Ever since Thom all of them have gradually gotten worse."

Jenna scowled at the mention of Nell's ex-boyfriend. "Thom's a jerk," she snarled, taking an aggressive gulp of coffee. "Any bastard who leaves his woman because he knocked her up should be bound, covered with honey, and left near a massive ant hill. Fire ants."

Nell snorted. "Glad you're exercising your literary abilities, Jen."

There was a moment of contemplative silence before Jenna spoke again. "He didn't deserve you if all he wanted was someone to control. You're better off without him. And so is Stephen." She thought of her little nephew, asleep in his bed and gripping his stuffed dinosaur, Killer, as he breathed softly. The mental picture made her smile.

"I know. I just can't help thinking about him, four and a half years ago or not." Nell's voice was equally quiet. "I loved him."

"I know." To lighten the tension, Jenna smirked, eyes closed. "I'm sure you'll find some relatively normal guy, with a great job, who loves kids. You're not cut out for the weird ones. Leave them to me."

As she had hoped, Nell laughed genuinely, dimples reappearing. "I'm not going to

argue. Only you would want the weirdoes, sis."

"Yeah," she agreed, stretching her arms out and resting her hands on the back of her head. "Only me." The comment was dry, but an odd undertone caused her sister to study her in concern over her teacup.

Nell moved to speak, looking up with a serious expression and opening her mouth, gathering the words—

... until the door opened again and Lily tripped over Jenna's suitcase, landing with a short scream and an unholy amount of noise on the hardwood floor as the man who took her out for her date blinked stupidly before rushing to help.

Taking the chance to dodge out of Nell's statement, Jenna lounged indolently in her chair, tipping it onto the two back legs precariously as she grinned wickedly at her younger sister, who glared at her with hot hazel eyes.

"Honey, I'm home!"

* * *

She breathed a sigh of relief as she tugged her dark-blond hair out of the ponytail she had it in and massaged her scalp with a hum. Sitting on her parents' plush tan suede couch in the AC, she booted up her computer and mired herself in notes and snippets of her novel for an hour, emerging only at a very young, very familiar voice.

"Auntie Jenna?"

She jerked her head up to look bleary-eyed at her nephew. "What, kiddo?"

He was a male version of Nell, with olive-toned skin, hazel eyes tinged with green, and dark hair, with Thom's legacy of a possible lean build and considerable height. He looked at her curiously, his innocent face confused as he fidgeted slightly, shuffling feet in battered tennis shoes, the laces untied. He brushed absently at hair that hung in his eyes.

"Jack says Auntie Lily's a sl-sl—" He frowned, then tried again, "slut," he finally managed. Jenna's eyes widened. "What's that?"

She blinked twice, before irritation clouded her mind.

"Don't say words like that, Stephen!" she snapped.

He nodded immediately, unperturbed by her expression. "Yes ma'am. What's it?"

Jackson Miller is dead, as of this moment. I'm going to kill one of my only male cousins. I don't care if he's sixteen and it's the middle of a family barbecue. He's dead meat, she thought darkly before turning to her current dilemma. She had to be careful—Stephen was extremely intelligent for a four-year-old. Suddenly, she hit on an idea and let a sardonic smile cross her face.

"Stephen, sweetie, why don't you go and ask Auntie Lily? I'm kinda busy, but I promise we'll play later."

His face lit up. "Tonka trucks, too?"

A firm nod. "Yes. Tonka trucks. Maybe Hot Wheels."

He grinned. "Okay!" Racing for the door, he tore past another guest, one who grinned easily.

"Hey, compadre," MacKenzie Lofton greeted, striding over to lean on the back of the couch, sage-green eyes dancing. She had her platinum hair pulled back into a ponytail, out of a pale-skinned face accented with expertly applied makeup. She tapped a manicured nail against her lip in thought before she smirked wickedly.

Jenna grinned at her closest friend despite herself. "What?"

"You will never guess what happened when you were off 'working' in the Windy City." She rolled her eyes at Mac's tone. "Thom decided to play in traffic?"

"Nope, but I've got something better," her friend sing-songed.

Jenna carefully put her laptop down before turning to the other woman. "You have my attention."

Mac hopped over the back of the couch, landing with a thump on the butter-soft suede. "You know that girl that Trent cheated on you with four years ago?"

There was a stinging pain at the mention of her ex-boyfriend, but Jenna ignored it as she glowered. "Yeah, so?"

Mac snickered. "Evidently, last weekend she had too much fun." Looking around first to make sure some of the guests milling around inside weren't listening, she turned back to Jenna, amused. "Angela went to that party, and she told Beatrice, who told me," she whispered, naming their two other close friends who were currently mingling outside. "Evidently, Trent's 'perfect feminine girlfriend' got drunk and slept with his roommate."

Jenna's eyes widened as she inhaled sharply. "No!"

"It gets better—he caught them. Spectacularly. And when he yelled at her, she said 'Like you're an innocent party! You're the one who cheated on that Jenna girl with me!' Now, everybody who was there can't stop talking about it."

"You're shittin' me." The knowledge that Trent had cheated on her hadn't been spoken of much, like a taboo, but evidently not anymore.

"I shit you not," Mac retorted. "Now, if you see him around, try and keep a straight face."

"I'll attempt, but don't place bets. Trent," she said, spitting his name, bitter vitriol rising like bile, "deserves all the grief he'll get."

"Bravo. Glad to see you're off the self-pity train."

"I got off that train years ago."

Mac mock-glowered. "Good damn thing. Anymore of 'I'm worthless' and I was going to kick your ass."

Jenna, looking at her laptop again, smiled. "I'll have a bull's-eye painted on it for you."

"You do that." Mac watched Jenna stare intently at her computer for a moment before she spoke with seeming nonchalance. "Guess who else I saw?"

"Hitler and Churchill playing chess?"

"Uh . . . no." Mac did glare this time, a bit worried at the sharpness of her friend's sarcasm. "I saw Matthew Boyd yesterday in Wal-Mart. He's home from Bahrain for a couple of weeks. He said in a couple of months they may station him at the Air Force base in Shreveport before he gets out for good at the end of this year."

"Barksdale?"

"Yeah, that."

Jenna shifted uncomfortably, eyes focused pointedly on the screen in front of her, the LCD reflecting blue-white on her face, ignoring the faint scar she had across her palm. Feeling Mac's scrutiny acutely, she made an irritated face. "What?" she snapped. Mac slowly grinned, reminding Jenna of the Cheshire cat. "Oh-ho!" she laughed. "Someone's awful touchy. I think widdle Jenny's got a crush on Mattie!"

She glared, aloof. "Don't be ridiculous." Matthew Boyd was a name that raised many emotions that she didn't want to feel, and he was the person she had been steadily not

thinking of since she came home, and he had not visited either. Her eyes went distant as she thought. He had been Trent's best friend, and her first friend – her father and his father were practically brothers. In fact, she could see Nathan Boyd through her parent's living room window, drinking Budweiser with her father.

When they were all halfway through college and Trent decided he'd find someone more girly, she'd decided she would never depend on anyone who could take a piece of her heart and crush it. Ever.

Matt was always viciously protective of those he called his own, even when they were children, and he had not taken what Trent did to her very well, as evidenced by the other boy's bloodied and bruised face two hours after the fact.

There was no one more protective of her, but no one who could push her buttons so well, either.

Her scar itched, and she remembered . . .

. . . a cut on her hand. . .

We'll be friends forever, right?

. . . a blood promise. . .

. . . but it was gone before it materialized.

She sighed in resignation. "He and I are friends, nothing more."

Mac cackled as she walked outside. "Sure, sure."

As if to punctuate her statement, a yell shattered the party atmosphere outside.

"JACK! I'M GONNA KILL YOU!" Jenna heard Lily yell. A moment later, the lanky teenager tore in from outside and bounded out of the front door, and Lily followed, her catlike face furious.

Jenna sighed. Welcome home. . .

* * *

Two days later, William Holmes looked up with the blue-grey eyes he shared with his middle daughter as someone rapped a staccato beat on the door. Sighing, he glanced forlornly at the presentation for his business meeting the next day before looking at his wife and daughters in the living room. "Rose! Get the door!"

Rosemary looked at her husband in exasperation and pushed dark brown hair out of her face before opening the door herself, her green eyes widening in surprise before a pleasant smile graced her face. "Matt! How nice of you to stop by!"

Jenna froze, her fingers hovering over the keys of her laptop, eyes wide, her heart beating like a drum. Both Nell and Lily smirked from the floor with Stephen, who was oblivious as he played with his GI Joe figurines.

"Uh, hi," Matthew Boyd greeted, running a hand over dark hair cropped uniformly short, dressed simply in a grey T-shirt and jeans. "Dad said Jenna was in town, so I came by."

Ignoring her sisters, who were watching her avidly, Jenna closed her laptop and left it on the couch before standing. "Hey," she greeted, forcibly keeping her voice even.

He smiled crookedly and his whole face lit up, much as it had when they were children; it was a smile not many people had seen since his mother died. He had always had a nice smile, so bright and cleverly charming it almost had a life of its own. However, rather than putting her at ease, his presence put her on edge. "Hey, Jen. I heard you were in town, so I—"

"Yeah, I heard," she said, glaring over her shoulder at her smirking sisters before leading him outside to the porch and closing the door. She stared at the man she had not seen in two years, not really sure what to say. The awkward silence stretched for several moments.

"So," Jenna said, being brave and breaking it first. "Bahrain, huh?"

"Yeah," he said sheepishly, glancing at his feet. "At least we're not bored. How's Chicago?" His voice was as tense as she felt, drawn tight like a wire.

She smiled slightly, hiding her nervousness expertly. "It's...exciting. Intoxicating. Different." Her smile faded a bit. "But not home."

He smiled half-heartedly, making an agreeing sound in his throat. "You never know how much you miss something before you leave it behind." His eyes were unfocused, but his tone indicated he knew exactly what that "something" was. Suddenly, she found it hard to breathe correctly.

Stop it! She told herself. Mac's just making me paranoid.

"I've been working on my book," she said quickly, changing the subject and not caring about how.

"Really?" He sounded interested and a bit relieved, absently running a thumb over the palm of his hand. "How's it coming along?"

"Alright—I've got a lot of research to do, but it's coming along great." Despite that tiny voice in the back of her head that always told her she was being stupid—it was currently yelling at her—she grinned at him, deciding to cut the conversation short, despite how happy she was to see him, because of how unnerved she was feeling without understanding why. "I'm sorry we can't talk longer, but I have to pack—I'm leaving tomorrow night."

He shrugged. Was it her imagination, or was he a bit disappointed? "I have to get back anyway—I just wanted to give you this." He handed her a sheet of paper that had his mailing address on it, and as his hand pulled away, she saw the scar that matched her own. "I'll see you later," he muttered in a nervous tone.

"Yeah," she answered faintly. "No problem." He turned to walk away.

We'll be friends forever, right?

Well, yeah. Why wouldn't we?

She gave in to impulse and grasped his wrist. When he faced her, bright blue eyes puzzled, she hugged him tightly.

"Be careful," she said softly into his t-shirt.

He smiled gently and it made her heart thump oddly. "Always." He released her and tweaked her nose before walking down the sidewalk.

She watched him go with an odd feeling in her gut, as if she were missing something right in front of her face. Going inside, she went toward the stairs with a barely audible, "I'm going to get ready for bed." Not waiting for her family's acknowledgement, she went upstairs with the full intention of calling Mac and asking what the hell was going on.

As Jenna ambled upstairs, Lily grinned at Nell, her own hazel eyes dancing. "What do you think?"

Nell grinned, tuffing Stephen's hair. "Jenna has dating issues."

I KEEP ON COUNTING

O. Chandler Crook

counting the cigarette butts in my ashtray
listening to an Ani DiFranco tune
she's ranting and raving
 you're ranting and raving
 and my head is spinning
counting the squares on my ceiling
counting backwards from ten
 trying not to listen
 to the stupendously stupid
 lexis you rant and rave
counting on God to listen
my prayer goes straight to his voice mail
 and here you are again
 embedding yourself
 deeper, deeper, deeper
 into what was once my brain
counting the cigarette butts in my ashtray
the ticking of the clock making me more insane
it's not worth it anymore, I say
 you're not worth it anymore
 but for some reason I stay



THE BODY OF CHRIST

Stoney Brown

It would take a God-awful saint
Not to notice those glowing red thighs,
Curved like eyelids peek out, flutter,
—(beneath) eyelash—floral skirt
I'd wager all the stars in my hand
That your skin tastes like the ocean
Or a sweet deep forest root.

You can tell just by looking that
Those humming red folds of river clay,
Poised beneath that hiked up skirt
[as if to run through all the tall grass and reed]
Would taste something like salt water and sky,
Like obsidian.

I am no saint but God gave me a tongue,
He gave me two lips and He left a small
Note in my breast pocket, close to my heart
Mind you, with instruction to run His gifts
Along your inseam.

He told me to find your flavor—
Ankle to inner thigh, acknowledge
My trail's resemblance to the veins
Of a red fall leaf or a poem written in
Heavy black ink. He also hinted
That I should notice the rush of blood
To the surface, how its being uneven
Makes it look as if you've turned to
Stained glass or mosaic, how if you
Stood up and tried to dance they
Might shatter, but would really do
Nothing, just shine and bubble
And look purple in the shadows.

It was a short note but that did not
Keep me from folding it into a small
Origami swan and eating it, comparing its
Flavor to what I imagined yours to be—

A dark dreaming obsidian kiss
A key that turned slow in the lock
A cinnamon nebula of salt and oxygen
Starburst—
And believing, if only for a moment, that
You are the Eucharist.



BRICKS

Amber Lee



PSILOCYBE PERSPECTIVE

Danielle Fromenthal

Meet Tom. He's a farmer.

My reality shattered. I saw Jesus on the cross. He lifted his head and I felt a flash of pain; I saw how he was trying get everyone to live in peace and harmony, how he had the same experiences and ideas as the hippies and ravers and other turned-on people have, and how he was killed for it. The psychedelic experience blows away all of the pillars that our society is built on. We're all family. Western society, which is built upon greed and ignorance, is the antithesis to this.

Regarded in many ancient cultures as a direct gateway to the spiritual world, psilocybin mushrooms may be as old as the history of humankind itself. Sculptures and shrines, religiously carved into depictions of mushrooms, have been discovered in religious sites throughout south and central America. The Aztecs referred to these mind-altering mushrooms as “the flesh of the gods” and consumed them in order to communicate with their gods. Not until the nineteen-thirties, when scientists discovered tribal peoples in Mexico still eating psychedelic mushrooms, did western civilization finally believe in the existence of these mind-altering mushrooms, and it wasn't until the psychedelic movement of the nineteen-sixties that any significant research was done on the substance. The active chemicals in hallucinogenic mushrooms are substances called psilocybin and psilocin. When the mushroom is digested, the psilocybin is converted by the body into the psychoactive substance psilocin—the chemical that produces the altered state of consciousness brought about by mushrooms. Psilocin has a chemical make-up very similar to the naturally occurring brain chemical serotonin, which is absorbed into the brain by receptor sites known as the 5-HT receptors. When the digested psilocin reaches the bloodstream and is received by these receptor sites, strange things begin to happen, and

scientists aren't quite sure why.

Meet Adam. He's a father of four.

During my first trip, the music I was listening to became a whole new world. I was on a boat, cruising a river of fire with unseen demons surrounding me. Although this may sound scary, it is my most memorable closed-eye visual ever. It probably lasted ten minutes at most real time, but it was a splendid little journey . . . I was riding a river of fire . . . Mushrooms showed me the meaning of perspective. Why should I have to listen to music only with my ears?

In 1962, before the war on drugs, one of the first and last experiments concerning the effects of psilocybin mushrooms was conducted in the basement of Marsh Chapel on the campus of Boston University. The subjects of the experiment were twenty theological students. Ten of the students were given a pill containing the active substance psilocin and ten students were given a placebo. These students then took part in a Good Friday worship service and were interviewed extensively afterward. According to the scientists, the experiment determined that "the persons who received psilocybin experienced to a greater extent than did the controls the phenomena described by our typology of mysticism." Simply put, those who took the active pill had mystical experiences, some of them profound.

Meet Bob. He's a twenty-three-year-old college graduate. He's taken psilocybin mushrooms about ten times in his life.

I'm an atheist; yet one time when I was tripping, I saw something that made me think, "Oh, this is what religious people are calling 'god'." The walls of my room became transparent, and I saw this "god" in the form of a giant vine, out in space . . . and it rotated and branched off again and again, and at the ends of its branches were the stars and planets and it was all a kind of dancing to the music I had on. It was a visual representation of the fact that there is an overall structure to the universe, and things move in time with each other. There are resonances. Well, as an atheist it gave me a sense of what it feels like to have a religious experience. Once upon a time I was kind of a preachy jerk atheist who thought religions should be abolished. And then I understood that some people have to feel that. I'm not one of them, but I understand. A psychedelic experience means a new perspective. When you take mushrooms, you realize how you've been locked into one perspective all your life, and you gain the ability to change that perspective.

Timothy Leary, a famous psychologist and advocate of psychedelic drug research, also conducted an experiment with psilocybin mushrooms. In the "Concord Prison Experiment," inmates were given therapy along with doses of psilocybin in hopes to convince them to change their lives. Short-term efforts to help criminals turn from their antisocial ways were rarely effective. But the results of Leary's experiment were astounding. More than half of the inmates projected to return to prison did not.

Meet Nick. He had a bad trip once . . .

. . . but it wasn't really bad. Well, it was by far my most intense trip. I had recently received three drug citations for marijuana at UD. I figured my parents would hate me for it. It made

me see something that I was kind of putting off. It scared the shit out of me so much that I was forced to deal with the mistakes I've made. It wasn't like me having to deal with my parents being angry; it was me dealing with myself. The spiritual aspect is one of the main reasons that I still consume mushrooms today. They allow me to think about my true beliefs, not the beliefs that society and religion fill my head with. I can see the beauty of people and nature. I am much more thankful for my parents. I've developed a better understanding of what their love for me consists of.

What social implications can a substance like this have in our world? Do psychedelic mushrooms really heal? Can they really heighten awareness? Can psilocybin really teach people to love and understand others? People who have taken the mushrooms say yes, but we won't know the truth without more research. Maybe these people just do too much dope. Currently, psilocybin mushrooms are illegal in the United States, so research remains virtually impossible. It's possible that we've finally found the key to unlocking the potential of the human consciousness, but for now, the mystery of psilocybin mushrooms must remain just that.



THE EMERGENCY ROOM

Victoria Krista Jenkins

Darkness surrounds me like a heavy blanket
as they pull the black mask over my face,
hide me from their voices talking over my head.

"She's a real fighter," I hear them all say,
as their hands pull at me from everywhere.
I fight to get away from them, but they hold me in place,

tell me I'm okay. "Relax sweetheart," the man says to me
as I fight to stay awake. I am afraid of his deep voice,
the feel of his hands holding the sides of my face.

As I fade away, I hear my mother's soft voice
speak to me as if through a tunnel. "It'll be okay.
It's all over now." I'm confused. I can't find her face.

The light blinds me as they pull the mask away.
Tiny black dots dance circles before my eyes,
hurt me as I try to hide them away.

As I touch the rough stitches with the tip of my finger,
the doctor smiles and asks: "Now that wasn't so bad was it?"
I cling to the arm of my mother, hide from the smile on his face.



METER

Kera Simon



WHAT'S LEFT

J. Callac



ELLERBE WALSH

Ryan Reid



EMPATHY AND TEXTURE IN BLUE

Rhonda Gleason-Pritts

CALL ME ELKANAH

Bob Lane

No babies today, no children at all
In spite of the prayers, the pills, and the knife
No babies today, no children at all
No blessings for my Hannah
I hung my harp in a willow
To sing of Faith
No more

HARPER RETURNS

Bob Lane

My son stands guarding the goal
A gaggle of friends fire at him in turn
Slap-away goes one ball, boot another
Over all, out of bounds to chuckles and jibes
A sound unheard by laughing children
Joins the chorus of happy sounds
One lone, rusty harp
Finds the echo.
For love
Of one
Son

COME WINTER WE PRY FOR OUR SINS

Ryan Reid

Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos. Aix sponsa. Anas americana. Anas discors. Green-heads. Woodies. Wigeons. Teal. How they'd fly. You'd sit in the blind and hear them. Not a quack or a call. You'd hear the sound of flight. Like helicopter blades slicing air, they'd swish right over your head and turn. A duck always, always lights into the wind. If you know which way the wind is blowing, you know how they'll move just before they land.

A sin is a debt.

To a man who knows the woods—knows the water, to a man who has grown up knowing these things, there is nothing but beauty here. The moon never told the fog night was over. The sun just started to wake itself. The slow transitions of heavens and ether revealed a clearing near the river where trees had pulled away like blankets from cold, green grass. A pond. A pond with ducks of all description and dozens in number bobbed up and down. They'd fly in and cup their wings. Nature's grandest sight is a duck cupping its wings. The mechanics. The motion. The grace. Few things in the world can make a man's heart flutter like the sight of a duck landing in the morning.

Just as their feet almost touched the water, metal slid, playing off the kinetics of more metal. Steel impacted brass. How beautiful they were. And my shotgun deafened the morning.

The ducks bobbing up and down on the water were plastic. The calls they heard were fake. The bushes near the pond were grasses, branches, and reeds tied to PVC pipe. There were few things offered to the birds that were real: that one last wind blowing against their faces, the sunrise, death moving at better than 350 meters per second. How they were fooled.

We knew the tricks. The mallard hen makes a low drone as she calls to the drakes. The wigeon's call is a soft whistle with three notes. Tattering feeding calls. Blaring come-and-

join calls. Every imaginable variation of everything in between.

Mallard drakes were the goal. Plump. Meaty. Gorgeous. Mallards stand as the king of the ducks.

Wood ducks are the poets of the birds. Smaller, nimble, adorned and built like no other. They usually mate for life. If any creature is evidence of emotion in Animalia, it's the wood duck. If they fly toward your blind in a pair, both will die. If you kill one, the other won't leave. He'll circle back around to die with his mate. He can't leave her. Teal, wigeons, canvasbacks and others were welcomed to the empty-stare safety of the fake flock.

We ate everything we killed. No duck was wasted. There are those in it for pure thrills. Mounted ducks fill their houses, fixed in position trying to mimic grace on the wing.

"That's the difference between a hunter and a killer," Dad would say. Feeding a family is different than killing in the name of sport.

But we did take some trophies. I had a mesh cap covered with mallard curls from their tails. If you were lucky enough to take ducks being studied by researchers, you won the metal bands that fitted on their orange legs. Trinkets and necklaces they made would tinkle with the movement of the wearer. The more you had, the better duck hunter you were. Pintails only kept their namesake earlier in the year. To attain one was a treasure. Photographs of our haul lined up in a row would highlight our return from the woods.

I can still remember my father stroking the feathers of a fallen mallard. "Look how pretty that is," he would say. Those days brought me closer to my father than I had ever been. I found a wisdom in him I had never known and at the time couldn't understand. A piece of down would get caught in his beard. We'd marvel at the colors of the animals while standing in cold and wet water that bites your toes. We always took time to look at the fallen.

I never will forget him telling me on several occasions, "Sometimes, I want to give up hunting with a gun. Sometimes, I would love to leave my gun at home and come out here. I'd call them in and watch them. I'd hunt them with a camera. I'd be able to see what they're like forever and show other people. That's what I'd like to do."

All debts must be paid.

Fourteen years old. Fourteen-year-olds are still feeling out their niche. Exploring the world. To think: at fourteen I held the power of death, I could outdo nature's best, I could halt her beauty from escaping and take a piece for myself.

I remember finishing hunting for the day. The sun was fully awake and moving toward high twelve. Many ducks wouldn't be moving as they were earlier. My father said he was going to stay and try to call in some more, but I wanted to be a fourteen-year-old and brave the trails, fields, and woods.

A four-wheeler is not uncommon in the south, especially in Louisiana. It's not a vehicle. It's a tool, an asset. And I remember the rush I got when I rode it.

A full day of hunting followed by riding something that can take you further in an hour than your feet can take you in a day. Exhaust pattered out the tailpipe. The grips on the tires churned up earth and I was off.

Riding on a four-wheeler extended my command. I could feel the wind against me. Speed was my ally. It became an extension of my body. Like my shotgun, it was another perfect blending of metal and man.

There are lots of incredibly distinct feelings in life. Riding the broad cushion seat of a four-wheeler is one. Feeling truly confident and superior is another. But when your bones are shattered underneath your skin, that's something you can never forget. It's immediate.

It's unforgiving.

I rolled off the wreck and cried out once in half-pain, half-fear. Broken left radius. Broken left ulna. Broken knuckle, middle finger of right hand. Pulled back muscles. Bloodied nose. Badly bruised legs that hit handlebars so hard, they bent the metal straight up.

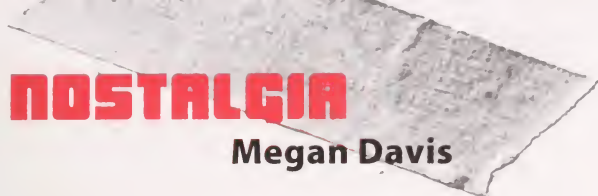
When you stroll through a wooded path, nature is breathtaking. When swelling starts to lock joints and pain reduces the function of limbs, looming trees and unfamiliar trails are not something you want to see anymore. You're not a master. You're a cog. And nature's vision of serenity becomes a nightmare of the Furies. Coyotes, wildcats, Louisiana black bears prey on crippled little things like you. Young, crippled, little animals.

The machine couldn't help me anymore. I was alone. Alone is another feeling you can never forget.

Penitence is currency.

I walked three and a half miles and climbed two fences just to get back to my father. Since then I've walked nine years and climbed lots of hurdles to get where I am. Never since have I brought a shotgun into a duck blind.

But since I've given up hunting with a gun, there are days when I still go to the woods. I stand on the bank sometimes and watch the ducks fly in on their own accord. And I think sometimes that I'd hunt them with a camera. I'd be able to see what they're like forever and show other people. That's what I'd like to do.



NOSTALGIA

Megan Davis

Send the men
To tread the trenches
And the women from the classroom to the kitchen.
Jump as the market falls.
Drink from Rosasharn's body to bide your thirst.
Leave the land of your youth,
And "Go West, young man."

Then again,
Send the men
To tread the trenches
And the women to burn their bras.
Try the red witches for their treachery.
Ban the book 'cause Twain's a racist.
See skin deep.

Commit yourselves to the repetition of history,
So that the "good ole days"
May rise again.



ILLUMINATED

Larrie King

RESEMBLANCE

Jessica Folse

Eyes wide—
Blinking several times
In rapid succession.
Straining
To hear the next words
Following his laughter.
Scanning
The room for those who
May have overheard us.
Darting
Looks finally shift
Back to him as laughter
subsides.
As he hugs me
To him I am like a
Nervous,
Soft, prehistoric,
Large-eyed marsupial
Looking
Out at the empty
Once dinosaur-run plains,
Waiting
Eagerly for this
Golden age of mammals.

THE CHURCH DIVIDED

Joel Carver

*None were ever witness to that cunning stretch
which caused our warriors to bend their knees,
nor could another speak in truthful utterance
of the origin of unmentionable sentiments such as these.
Oscillating in indecision, a skeptic's labyrinth—
to what appellation is owed this sensation?
It's a rush of blood wrapped warmly in cheer, but
ignorance aptly reckons it a scientific creation.*

A chapel looms in a dimly lit meadow.
Murmurs slink beneath the yellowed grass:
"Some savior commands conscientious judgments,"
but his petitions to our hearts lack merit.
When, except that night—interrupted through a black
blaze that charred the remainder of a twisted faith,
will a fleshly obsession redeem itself
beneath the glaze of a supernal sunrise?

A priest is battered beneath a bishop's buffet,
and an evangelist is scorned by a minister's scold.
Rosary garrotes the Anglican who slit himself with
broken shards of her stained glass effigy;
she watched with such disdain! And as the blood
coagulates in its burgundy resplendence,
their twisted paths congregate once more
at the exhausted conclusion from which they were rent:

Salvation is only achievable in the perfect sect.

*The principle is accepted, yet with particulars wide open.
Under which proclamation can our souls be kept in trust?
And who can define the valuation of divinity save
that celestial one so readily discarded in pursuits of lust?*



It required every ounce of discipline in her narrow frame
to withhold the elation threatening to push through
from underneath her skin. Eighteen years of celibacy
damned perpetually only to achieve his silver medal.

Pressed firmly and swaddled in white bed sheets
(suggesting purity but screaming the contrary),
she'll remember His name when traversing the threshold,
but Sunday mornings have grown forlorn in her absence.

Vulgarity purposed intently to slight the true emotion,
that he'll never quite measure up to what he desires.
His last attempt at confronting the folly of his decisions
abandoned him, an ill child spinning on a carousel.
To tip back another glass might prove detrimental,
but his life is too infantile to be so easily corrupted.

We'll jokingly direct damnation on them—
unsuspecting that we fall into rank behind our prey.

The chapel is crumbling. Its walls drift
to the ground like scattered gunpowder,
but the only shots we hear are the breaking
bones of jaws overworked in advocating hypocrisy.

A petition to repent wavers just above their lips,
but a nearly imperceptible cord remains tying back
their tongues. It threatens to break but is only stifling
laughter at their essays to turn in a definitive direction.
The matter connects in a full circle but the specifics note
chaotic within the arcs, they'll persist in roaming
about the tempest's eye but take no consequential steps,
speaking intent but accomplishing nothing.

*If the saddest excuses for retribution may be deemed
an unwavering religion, how vile is that mockery?*

*What esteem can be relished when the fading hope
of a bleeding conscience resorts to added debauchery?*

*There were none found to hold their tongues
when circumstance proved the greater fool,
yet those words never found their intended niche:
the recesses of a blameless heart turned cruel.*





BEAUTY

Devon Ainsworth

STONEY AND THE PREVAILING WINDS ADMIRE THE TREES

Stoney Brown

There was wind in
The trees tonight
About the street lights

Stoney heard the west
And the leaves
"I speak to him
Sometimes," she says
The wind, with her smiles

Laying on the floor
The beer gets to him
Makes him disregard
Her and the night
And he listens to a
Song he's heard a
Hundred times

I crinkle paper
With a second wind
Crumple leaves
With Stoney's
Cold, red hand
Blur the lines
And the like
And such as

But before all that
I was looking up
In the trees
Watching the wind
Roll through it

He thought of how
The wind moved
Lowered his hands
Into his pockets
He stood in the street

I pretend my eyes
Are hands and lay them
On crumbled sidewalks

Stoney's eyes are hands
Tonight, blow the west wind
She says it's pretty here



SMASH

Amber Lee



REFLECTION

Brandon Michael Collinsworth

Susan is a creature of habit. She wakes up at six o'clock every morning—work day or weekend. She showers, then wakes her husband and kids up on the way to the kitchen to make breakfast. She gets in her car every morning at 7:20 to go to work and arrives at almost exactly 7:45, barring traffic lights. On Tuesdays, she has lunch with her best friend at the same steakhouse. She spends every other lunch break at her desk eating a packed sandwich or salad with either carrots or Wheat Thins. She comes home at the same time everyday and immediately begins supper. After supper is done and the kitchen is straightened to her approval, she joins her family in the living room, and they usually watch TV. Susan likes ritual and television provides that, the same programs on at the same time every week. Saturday is movie night, but Susan refuses to watch until after supper. She sends her two children to bed at nine o'clock. Jake usually walks upstairs to their bedroom at about ten, but not all the time—he doesn't cling to habits as hard as she does. Susan watches the news at ten and then turns in for the night.

Between two and three in the morning, Susan wakes up to go to the bathroom. Her bladder is not always as willing to accept her habits; occasionally she awakes at this time not even having to go to the bathroom, but she does anyway. Her mind needs the habit. Tonight her bladder is cooperating, and she rolls ritually out of bed, bowing to her habits for the last time.

Her bedroom is the last door down the upstairs hallway; the bathroom is next door. The only other door upstairs leads to her twelve-year-old daughter's room, the eldest of her two children. Patrick's room is downstairs. He occasionally begs his mother to let his sister and him switch bedrooms, but why upset the routine. A dim night-light is plugged into an outlet between Gabrielle's room and the bathroom; it casts enough light to be sure she will not step on any Legos or little, green army men, but Patrick rarely plays up here

Jake never turns on the light when he goes to the bathroom at night. "I don't like the way the light wakes me up," he said to her, as she mopped the floor around the toilet one morning. Susan did turn on the light—the fluorescent one over the sink, not the large one, even though there was little chance of her pissing on the floor. If she had not, she might never have seen anything and this night might have turned out differently.

After draining her bladder, she walked to the sink, turned on the water, washed her hands, dried them, and then washed her face, refreshing herself before she headed back to bed. Susan believed it was impossible for a woman to walk out of a bathroom without looking herself over in the mirror. Depending on the circumstances, this look could take anywhere from a couple of seconds to a couple of minutes. Seeing as how she was going back to bed and not out to eat or off to work, she opted for the cursory ten-second glance for blackheads or new wrinkles. She was last in here examining her reflection not four hours ago, so the only changes were that her bright-blue, inquisitive eyes were now dull and her sandy blonde hair was disheveled. Deciding that even in her bleary state she still did not look a day over her thirty-one years, her hand move up to turn off the light but stopped.

The sink and mirror stood directly in front of the doorway, so looking into the mirror, you could see out the door. You could even see the towel shelves on one side of the door, but on the other side, the open door took up the rest of the view. In the hall outside the door, there was nothing to see but the eggshell wall with dim light fading as it stretched down the hall toward her bedroom. No table or any other piece of furniture blocked the light on its march up the hall, nothing to cast long shadows on the wall. But there was a shadow there. If she had not spent every night for seven years standing in front of this mirror she might not have even noticed, but she did. She could have written it off as something Jake or one of the children left in the hall, but that had never happened before, at least not that she noticed. But there was something else, too; it moved.

When she noticed, it seemed to be getting larger as if coming closer. Then, as if it had sensed her awareness, it stopped moving. Now it swayed, not rhythmically like something being blown by a fan or vent but like something anxious. Anxious to be off, tottering back and forth to keep the blood flowing. It seemed to grow and deflate, not a lot, but noticeably, like it was breathing in and out heavily, but she heard nothing. After a few seconds the swaying stopped, but the slow pulsating still remained.

Susan was frozen; her hand still hung in the air begging to be allowed to turn the light off. Her eyes were locked on the figure, "No, that's not right," she thought, "It's not a figure, it's just a shape." If she took her eyes off of it, it might pounce and she could be dead before any sound could escape her lips. If she flipped the light, it would use her sudden blindness in the dark to slip behind her and wrap its hands, tentacles, claws, or whatever it had around her neck. With every bit of will that she wasn't using to watch the thing, she listened as hard as she could, but all she could hear was the hammering of her heart. If it was breathing, it wasn't making a sound. That was hard to believe looking at it; if it was breathing it had to be hard. She imagined breath coming out of a mouth full of razor sharp teeth so thick and disgusting that it was actually a green wisp of smoke. She sniffed the air, but there was nothing there but the faint smell of her almost out of date plug-in air freshener.

"This is crazy, I am crazy." The thought came to her suddenly and she felt childish, but

still terrified. "I'm sleepy and I'm seeing things. I am not five years old and the coat in the corner is not a monster."

Recalling the screams that awoke her one night from her five-year-old. He had spent the previous night with his grandmother and stayed up watching scary movies after she went to bed. It took a month for him to sleep through a whole night again. But he was five years old, she was thirty-one, and this was not a monster, it was a coat. Maybe it was one of his damn Barney dolls; the pulsating and tottering were not breathing and swaying, just the night-light starting to flicker out. This made so much sense, and she started to smile to herself. Her heartbeat began to slow, and the intensity of her gaze started to wane. She knew that if she walked out into the hall right now and looked up the hallway she would see a purple dinosaur sitting in the floor between the night-light and the bathroom. As soon as the thought of going out in the hall occurred to her, her heart picked up pace, and new fear washed over her.

She knew if she stood there the fear would build again, and she would have to rationalize herself back to adulthood. She had to end it. Her hand was still hung in the air, and it just occurred to her that her shoulder ached from hanging there so long. So she flipped the light switch.

"Uhah." She was so horror-struck that the sound was barely more than a whisper. She did not know what she was trying to say, but this sound was all she could get out of her mouth.

This time there was no mistaking it. It definitely got bigger and probably closer. It had to be standing just out of view, whatever it was. The images her mind created were dreadful, and even though she just went to the bathroom a little urine squirted into her panties. It had moved. There was something there, Barney couldn't have moved. Her mind was not playing tricks on her. When she saw it move the first time she could have been still half asleep, but fear had awoken her and sharpened her senses. Something was there, and it was still pulsating, or breathing.

It had obviously heard her, but why should that matter? Why did that make it stop? It had to be bigger than she. Shadows can play size tricks on you, but if it was a monster or the boogeyman, they don't care if you see them. Maybe it was a person. "Jake, Patrick, Gabrielle?" she said in a low, shaky voice.

She waited a moment, her eyes never leaving the mirror and the shape. She hadn't even dared take the half-second it would have taken her to turn around; she knew that half-second would be all it would take to get her. There was no rational reason for thinking this, but then again, there wasn't anything about this that was rational. After a few long seconds, when she started to think about what to do next, she got an answer.

"Aaaaaahhh."

It wasn't loud, but it was deep. Much like her first response, it wasn't an answer, just a sound, a horrible sound that told her all she needed to know. There was no green smoke coming around the doorway to put an exclamation on this, but she knew that if she could see around the corner she would see the green smoke or worse, the long sharp teeth opening in a horrible smile and that would be the last thing she saw. Tears began to run down her cheeks and her vision got blurry. She did not blink, look away, or close her eyes. She wanted to live.

"Please don't hurt me."

The low, shaky voice again, but you could hear the tears, too. It moved again; she knew this was it. It was finished playing games with her; it would move now, she would see it. It would be worse than her mind could even imagine—teeth, claws, eyes, tentacles, forked tongue, and parts she couldn't identify. She would be so overcome by terror she wouldn't even make a sound; she would meet her end quietly.

"This is the way the world will end, not with a bang but with a whimper," she thought to herself, only she wouldn't even be able to whimper. All the people she would never see again and all the things she would never do ran through her mind. Then, it moved.

It didn't move toward her, but it did move. She stiffened as if rigor mortis had already set in her. Then it started to move away. As its shadow faded, it began to drag something along the wall—a tail, arm, claw, or who knew what. The sound made bumps break out all over her body and she shook violently, losing sight for a second. Then it was gone.

The mirror showed nothing now but the dim hallway lit with a cheap children's night-light. Yet even with this reprieve she remained frozen, unable to move. Her body still waited for the deathblow even though there was no longer anything there to deliver it. Her mind raced into gear: "Shut the door, shut it now! Move, Bitch," her mind screamed at her. Yet a few more agonizing seconds passed with her still frozen. Then she turned, stretched, and slammed the door in quick motion. The next second she locked it. She turned back to the mirror that had just moments ago shown her a horrible mystery but could see nothing in the dark, not even her reflection. A child's fear of the dark and the unknown compound her own fears and she flipped the light switch. This time she turned on the large one that illuminated the room with two bulbs of 75 watts, soft, white light. Her reflection met her gaze and made her jump out of surprise.

Five minutes ago this reflection had been one of a beautiful young woman, even in her sleepy, groggy state. The vision of herself she now beheld was that of a middle-aged woman who looked sick. She was pale, shaking, and puffy eyed, and looked as if she had sprouted a few new wrinkles. With her back still to the door she slid down until her butt connected with the floor. She crossed her arms over her knees, and dropped her forehead to them until she was staring straight at the hard wood floor and backs of her slim ankles and feet, and she began to cry. Not soft crying, but really letting it flow. She cried that way for almost an hour, then just sat that way with her eyes closed and eventually fell asleep.

"Oh my God, it's back. It's pounding at the door. Oh God. Oh God. What do I do? Please?"

"Susan, are you all right?" Jake's voice. The hammering that had immediately started in her chest began to subside. Susan wiped her eyes and tried to focus. She shook her head, trying to shake the cobwebs loose.

"Suse?"

She could hear the concern and maybe a little agitation in his voice.

"What's going on, baby? Are you all right in there?"

"I'm fine," she said. That wasn't good; horrible answer. She was pretty fucking far from fine. What was she going to do, though? Open up the door, fling her arms around him, and tell him how glad she was to see him? How glad she was just to see daylight?

"Oh honey, you'll never believe it; the boogeyman tried to get me last night. Finally he left; I was too scared to come out of the bathroom so I stayed in here all night. Can we move out of here today? You and I will take the day off work, go house hunting and stay

in a hotel until then, ok?."

That sounded ridiculous. She was pretty sure she could get Jake to finally believe that she had seen something, but she would never get him to believe it was the boogeyman or monster, maybe a burglar or some teenager trying to sneak a peek at her in her underwear, but not a bonafide, honest-to-goodness, suck-out-your-eyeballs monster.

"I'm fine," she stated again trying to sound as calm and normal. "I was just feelin' a little sick. Let me get a quick shower and I'll be right out."

"Ok. Don't take too long though, or I'll be late for work. You sure you're ok, it sounded like you were cryin'."

"No I wasn't cryin'." She might have sounded a bit too defensive then. "I'll be out in a few minutes." She did take a shower, and it felt great.

When confronted with something truly terrifying, most sane and rational people will begin to believe the worst parts of it were their imagination. They will often say they don't really remember what happened when they actually remember it perfectly. They will assume that their mind has made up most of it, but it hasn't. After a while they will delude themselves into thinking it wasn't really that bad. Their imagination will start to work then to create something that is different from what really happened, something that the human intellect can process as plausible. Only in horrible nightmares will they recall what really happened.

Susan was sane and rational, but she was not to the point where she didn't think she saw something last night. As the water fell over her body washing away her dried tears and piss, her fears and certainty began to go down the drain with the water. She got out of the shower, towed off and put her robe on, and almost felt normal and safe again. Jake knocked at the door again.

"Suse, are you almost done?"

She opened the door and gave her husband a kiss.

"Hey, I don't want whatever you got," he said, playfully pulling back. "You look alright. Hell, you look sexy."

"I feel fine, I was just a little nauseous, but it passed."

Jake kissed her and swatted her butt as she walked toward the bedroom to get dressed. The kids were already up, and by the time she got dressed and made it downstairs they had already downed a couple of Pop-tarts and were on their way out the door. She fixed herself a bowl of cereal, cut an orange, and poured a glass of milk. She sat eating and reading the paper. A few minutes later, Jake emerged. He grabbed a cereal bar, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and headed out the door. Just a few seconds after the door had shut behind him, the realization—that she was in the house all alone—set in. She tossed her paper aside, grabbed what was left of her orange, and headed out.

On her way out, she passed the mirror that was right beside the door. It had a little dish underneath where they put their keys. Looking in the mirror, she could see back into the living room. The upstairs was visible from the living room and from this mirror as well. There was a flicker of something up there. Yesterday she might have turned around and walked upstairs to try and find out what it was, but today a shudder ran down her back as she walked out the door without a second glance in either the mirror or over her shoulder.

The door to the bathroom stayed shut, always. Later the same day after it had all happened, Gabrielle had walked out of the bathroom and left the door open. Susan snapped at her to close it. No one had questioned her about her outburst. Everyone knew that mom liked the house just so, and even though keeping the door closed seemed to be a new thing, they immediately adapted to closing it.

Susan no longer went to the bathroom at night and never used the upstairs one at all. She began to refrain from drinking anything after dinner. Still she awoke every night, but she did not get out of bed. Hell, she didn't even open her eyes most nights. She would just lie there with her eyes shut until she fell back to sleep.

Sleep did not elude her the way one might think it would after such a traumatic event. The first night she followed Jake up to bed at ten. Once they lay down, she wrapped an arm around him, put her head on his shoulder, and watched the rise and fall of his chest until she drifted off. All of this may seem strange, considering less than twenty-four hours ago she thought she was about to be eaten alive, but she felt secure next to Jake. Of course, the thing would have ripped her to shreds and would have had little trouble with Jake as well, but all the same, she felt comforted. There was another thing, too: Susan's mind made a connection between the bathroom and the monstrosity. It never would have come to her, or would come to her again as long as she avoided the bathroom. The last and probably most important reason she could sleep was the fact that she had never laid eyes on the thing. All she had was her imagination, and the rated R monster was quickly becoming PG-13.

Life went on for Susan. She never did settle back into habits, though. This could be viewed as good and bad. Without her steadiness of habits she became disconnected and restless. Her family noticed this on some level, even Patrick. But life seemed more adventurous to her. She could not predict what she would feel like doing next. This at times made her moody and disagreeable, but more often than not it made her spontaneous and fun. Her family most assuredly noticed this and liked the improvement.

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months. After six months the memory of what happened felt more like the memory of a nightmare than anything that had actually happened. She did know that it was not just a nightmare. The sound that the thing made would not leave her, and perhaps that alone made her acknowledge the reality of what had happened.

Susan was ambitious and practical; she was going to move beyond this event and get on with her life. She would not live her life in fear and let it drive her to madness. That is why she never even suggested moving. The simplest and most practical solution was simply to avoid the bathroom when possible. She would still go in to clean it from time to time, but only on the weekend when everyone was home. She often enlisted Patrick's help just for comfort.

Growing up she had always disregarded her own needs and wants for the sake of her younger sister who was often sick. In college, she worked forty hours a week and took the maximum hours she could, pushing herself beyond most people's breaking points both mentally and physically. Early in her career she had made her family sacrifice by working extra long hours and weekends to make a name for herself, all the time ignoring her guilt. After five years of a strained marriage which she took full responsibility for, the last five

years had been great. Everything had been worth it, all the sacrificing paid off. She was successful. Jake and she would never have to struggle, and her children would know a much better life than she could have ever hoped for as a child. That is why she would suppress that fear that made her chest clench every time she walked by the bathroom door. That is why her heart forced her mind to admit that it had no idea what she had seen that night. That is why she lied and told herself that it had only happened that once, not since then, and probably never again.

She upgraded their home security system, almost as an afterthought. She had no real belief that it would have stopped that thing. But that was as far as she was willing to take it. She was not willing to uproot her family and destroy all that they had created, not for her fear. She had worked too hard at making a happy home to give it up.

* * *

Almost one year had passed since that night. Only her nightmares seemed unwilling to let go of it. She dragged herself out of bed a little past six that morning. She woke her kids and fixed their breakfasts. She showered—downstairs, of course. By the time she came out, her children had already left for school. She sat at the table with a magazine and cut a grapefruit. Half way through her grapefruit Jake bounded down the stairs in a mad rush. He was running behind again.

“Shit. Why can’t I drag my lazy ass out of bed on time? I have only been getting up at the same time for nine years.”

She smiled at this remark she had heard all too often. Jake gave her a peck on her cheek, still straightening up his tie. He did an about-face after this and did a mad rush for the door, as if that extra half-second he saved by rushing would stop him from being late. After all these years Susan was pretty sure the company had accepted the fact that he was never on time for anything.

Susan finished her breakfast, but still continued to read for a few more minutes. After finishing a particularly juicy story about the latest Hollywood breakup, the time had come for her to get to work. She stood and a feeling of disorientation took her as she realized she wasn’t sure where she had left her purse. This would be one of the downsides of losing her rituals. A year ago it would always be on her dresser; now she never knew. She retraced her steps in her mind and came to the conclusion that it was upstairs, probably on the dresser. She ascended the stairs and started to walk down the hall and at once noticed a certain door was open.

This did not cause her to halt or even stutter-step. It was simply an observation, but once she was in front of the door she did stop to close it. This was just about subconscious; her mind wanted that door shut. Without crossing the threshold she reached in to close the door, but then another part of her subconscious mind woke up. There was a cup on the floor in front of the sink.

She couldn’t leave it there. It would bother her all day, in that same slightly painful, mostly annoying way a cold sore did. She started to walk in and a voice, which by this time was small, spoke up and begged her not to. Unfortunately, Martha Stewart’s voice was in there too, and it was louder.

Patrick, it had to be Patrick. She shook her head, though she wasn’t mad at him; he

was very neat for a boy his age. But he was a boy, and boys will be boys. She leaned down to grab the cup and stood up. Now she was staring at herself in that infamous mirror. Then the cup dropped to the floor.

It was standing right behind her.

This was just like she knew it would be that night. It was worse than anything her mind had thought of that night or since then. It didn't resemble anything; the only part of its anatomy she could identify was its teeth. This creature did not embody fear; it couldn't because it was beyond even the sickest of imaginations. It had been spat from the darkest pits of hell. Its flesh still seemed to sizzle and melt as if it were fresh from its fiery womb. Susan knew that soon her flesh would sizzle, too.

She was completely paralyzed with fear; her knees were locked like boards, her feet were lead weights, her hands and arms didn't even feel like they were there anymore. Tears filled her eyes and she began to tremble ferociously, making the horrendous image in the mirror blur. Her life was over and she knew it. Even if the monstrosity turned and left right now she would die. If not physically then mentally; there was no way she could ever gaze upon this thing and return to a normal life. She not only knew she was going to die but welcomed it. She didn't want to live with the nightmares and images of this thing.

"I never told anyone that I loved them this morning."

This was her last thought.

* * *

The kids arrived home at their usual time after school. They noticed Mom's car in the driveway, but she did not answer when they called her name. So they just didn't think she was home, and they went about their day. Gabrielle had to go to the bathroom and found the upstairs bathroom door not only shut, but locked. Once again this did not interrupt their day; they simply used the downstairs bathroom. Jake arrived home at about 5:30 P.M., his usual time. He did find the presence of Susan's car troubling. He found the fact that she did not answer her cell phone more troubling, and he was in a panic when he called her office and found out she had not been there all day. His next phone call was to the police.

While they waited eagerly for the police, Gabrielle remembered the bathroom door. Her father sprinted up the stairs and began to bang on the door as soon as he reached it. When there was no answer, he did not give it a second banging. He backed up a step, lowered his shoulder, and slammed into the door. Jake was no bodybuilder, but he was in fair shape. The door didn't give way the first time, and it thanked him for his first effort by sending a sharp pain through his shoulder. But he was not going to be denied, and the door relented on his second attempt.

Evening had set in well, and the bathroom was virtually dark when the door came crashing open. The dull night-light did not cast much light, especially with him standing in the door way. He reached and flipped the switch.

Nothing.

There was a cup on the floor and the mirror had a crack running its entire length from top to bottom, but other than that there was nothing in the room.

ERSTER

Graham Harvey

Blurred are their outlines, but visible still
are the pines
that tower
beyond.

Sleeps half the moon on the mountain more
distant.

Yes, imminent now is the dawn.

Onward they march, the seconds of silence
as sharper,
the quiet world
looms.

Till finally, Sol shall awake from his slumber—
The demons of night, consumed.

RED

Blade Marcantel

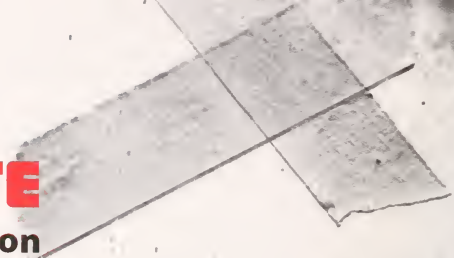
Let's paint
Let's paint the wall
It's dull and white
An empty canvas
Without any color
Without any flare
Let's paint
Let's paint the wall red
I'll paint it with passion
I'll paint it with rage
With sorrow and pain
With laughter and joy
I'll paint the wall
I'll destroy its blandness
I'll paint the wall red
My paintbrush is loaded
As I lean against that wall
My paintbrush is cocked
As I silently say my prayers
I pull my brush's trigger
And paint the wall red

HEAT (THE WAKING)

Jessica Folse

Intrusive, eclipsing circle;
Light filtering through warm shadow—
Most welcomed thawing heat.
Curving mauve bending up to deep purple
Keeps sheltered vigil with draping white lace.
Oceaned orbs dilate whimsically,
Blackness shaped by creasing, shaded red.
Gentle creaking-down from vigil.
Shaped shadows quickly fade; mellow-
Unbearable dark heat.

Powerful, terrifying sense;
Flesh shifting in darkness: falling—
Unsettling nausea.
Mass of routed feelings search for meaning
In every nothing thought attempts to touch.
No response to needs from buried limbs,
Tears' essence searching for lost exits.
Trusting to break final dust ties;
Terror now ebbing—avoiding
Unbearable dark heat.



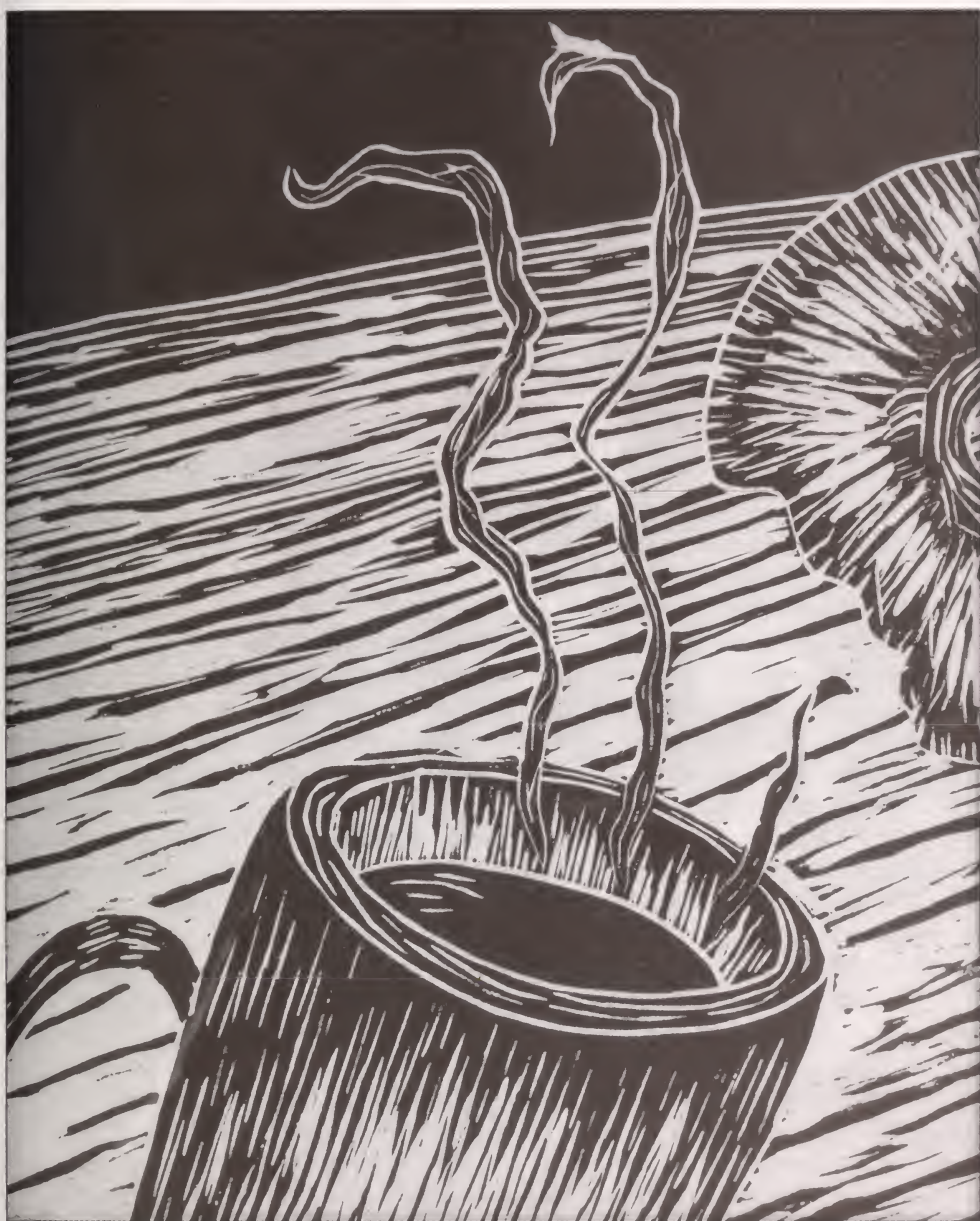
TRIPLICATE

Amanda Robinson

That morning you left for work
carrying your black tin lunchbox
and a cup of strong coffee. I felt a sudden
nauseous wave as I watched you leave,
and I cringed under my skin
so much that the purple tendrils
in my wrist drew up, wilting.

That afternoon I went to an art gallery.
I couldn't help but be inspired by all of it.
Its shades and colors in triplicates—
two by two and four by six, hanging.
Some of them giant rock formations
painted over the plaster. Others
led into a brush or canyon—
deep, shady—a blind ravine
waiting for the unsuspecting to trip
and be weightless if only for the fraction
of a second it takes to begin to fall.

That evening I watched the news. The TV
showed the plant where you work, all its
pipes protruding in the air like volcanoes,
smoke boiling up into the cotton. It had erupted,
but you didn't rise from the lava. Maybe now
you are the vapor, maybe the ash.
I am the rock, peeking through a triplicate.



BREAKTIME

Rachel Waskom

A FOAK IN THE ROAD

Charles Waylon Salter

The Neutral Strip was a lawless no man's land, that was governed by no one. This area was a haven for crooks and murderers looking to escape the law. So, naturally the people who settled this area were not necessarily the most virtuous folks. Many stories have come from this part of the woods about vandals and cutthroats. However, this story is different, it involves four young men and the strange events that can take place in one day out in this once savage part of the country.

On an excessively breezy March day C.W. was making his way to Blue Lake to visit with his relatives, the Sonniers. C.W. pulled into the driveway as Wade was coming out the front door with Mitch and Kevin behind him.

"What's going on, han?" Wade said as he stepped off the porch.

"Not too much, just gonna see what y'all was up to."

Wade's a bit of a character, and he has about as many tattoos on his arms for about as many times as he's been to rehab.

"Where are y'all goin?" C.W. asked.

Mitch replied, "We were just headed to the bar-pits to ride around in the sand." Unlike his older brother, Wade, Mitch is a liar, a thief, and doesn't quite have the sense that God gave a piss-ant, much less the capacity for abstract thought.

"Well it looks like I got here just in time, I'll go with y'all."

C.W. and Wade got in the cab of Wade's ragged ole Nissan, which he referred to as the "death trap" because of the many times it had ended up in the ditch when he fell asleep driving drunk. Kevin, a little pip-squeak of about five feet and in some way affiliated with the family, followed Mitch into the back of the truck.

With just a short drive they were at the bar-pits, several acres of trees and sand, that is accessible when the lake is down. It is a great place to do donuts and slide around curves,

with several miles of trails for the taking. They rode around for a good while jammin southern rock through busted-out speakers. Unfortunately, fun was about to fly south by way of an eight-foot creek channel. Wade pulled up to the creek and everyone got out to survey the situation.

"Mitch, I think we can make it," Wade said.

"Aw sure, han, this ant nothing," he answered.

Every person there knew dang good and well that it wouldn't work, and even if it did they would just have to go through it again on the way back out. But they were all content not to turn around and go back home like a bunch of old ladies. Wade backed the truck up a good ten feet or so, revved the engine up a couple of times, and hollered, "Hang on, han!" They sped toward the creek in a manner that would rival Starsky and Hutch or even the Duke boys. The truck hit the water with a tidal splash and proceeded to float like a lead weight. Wade and C.W. crawled out the windows, and Mitch and Kevin jumped out the back onto the ground.

"Crap. Well I'll walk back to the house but I sure ain't walkin by myself," Wade said.

"C.W, you come with me, and you two knot heads stay with the truck."

They began the five or so mile walk back sharing the last cigarette they had. It was a real busy day on Blue Lake Road; they met a grand total of one car full of old women who looked like they were coming back from prayer meeting. And, no, they didn't bother to stop.

"Wade, I've got a idea! All we have to do is get Uncle Gene's tractor and a chain and we'll go back and pull the truck out slicker than a whistle."

"Yeah, that's a good idea, I just hope those two yahoos are there when we get back."

They finally made it back home, but saw Wade's dad, Big Raymond, looking agitated as he was doing something in the yard with a shovel; so they snuck around him through the woods. They got the tractor started and were in the process of pulling out of the driveway when Big Raymond came running after them with shovel in hand hollering, screaming, cussing, and demanding that they put Geno's tractor back. They could have easily outran him, but as C.W. was making it out of the driveway, he missed second gear and hit fourth—which neither the boys nor the forty-year-old tractor were expecting. C.W. quickly slammed the tractor back into the right gear and then turned it around with Big Raymond chasing behind. Wade was hollering, "Come on you SOB, you want some."

To give an idea of just how rank an individual Big Raymond is, he was burned while working on a pipeline back in the sixties. Most of his arms, neck, and back are covered with scar tissue and primitive plastic surgery. So he don't just act mean, he looks the part as well. Wade and Big Raymond fought often, with Big Raymond getting his butt kicked most of the time, but he was very persistent. Wade and Big Raymond would have fought, but that shovel thrown into the mix had them both a little nervous.

Big Raymond looked at C.W. and said, "You come with me."

They got in Big Raymond's vehicle and C.W. explained the situation and told him the location of Wade's truck. As they drove over the last hill going toward the bar-pits, they saw smoke hovering over the treetops like a big storm cloud as far as the eye could see. Everything sped up a few rpm's after that. C.W.'s heart skipped several consistent beats, as if the whole deal with him, Wade, Big Raymond, and the tractor was not hair raising

"What were ya'll doing out here?"

C.W. didn't reply because he knew what Big Raymond was thinking: They let a fire get out of hand and were in some way going to use Geno's tractor to put it out.

The fire had already spread so close to the road they couldn't drive back to the spot where Mitch and Kevin were. As soon as the truck stopped, they both jumped out and began running and hollering, as if it was some unspoken plan. C.W. could tell by the sound of Big Raymond's voice that common thoughts were running through their heads.

C.W. and Big Raymond kept desperately screaming for Mitch and Kevin.

The trails through the bar-pits ran for miles and twisted and turned like a chicken snake's back. On a normal day, C.W. would have trouble finding the truck but the search was near impossible in the midst of a scalding inferno.

Big Raymond kept asking C.W., "Where are they?"

All C.W. could muster was, "I don't know, I don't remember."

They were running as fast as they could, and every breath seemed to contain more smoke than oxygen. Then, by some random act, they came to a fork in the trail and split up. Now C.W. was not only surrounded by a forest fire—he was also alone, but he kept on running and hollering. He could faintly hear Big Raymond still frantically yelling, which was in some way comforting. C.W. ran through patches of smoke that were so thick that the only thing possible to do was to hold his arms out, close his eyes, and hope that he came out of it before his breath ran out. The deeper they ran into the woods the worse the fire and smoke got. C.W. came to another one of those thick smoke patches, and it didn't seem to end. He could feel his lungs running out of the contaminated air that was in them. Finally, he ran as fast as he could with his eyes half open. He had to take another breath. He inhaled a deep harsh breath of pine smoke and began to choke, and that is when he really began to worry. Choking and gagging, C.W. fell to his knees and in a panic he didn't really know what to do. C.W. was not quite ready to give up yet, although he knew that this was the stuff that made it to the evening news: "Several people die in forest fire." On his hands and knees, C.W. began running like a mangy dog just to realize that he was only a few feet away from the end of the smoke cloud and breathed a sigh of relief. Without any time to spare, he resumed his running and calling.

C.W. finally came to a spot that looked familiar, and shortly after that he reached the lake and fresh air. About that time, Big Raymond appeared out of the fire and smoke. C.W. was so happy to see him that he could have kissed that coonass bastard. However, Big Raymond didn't share his enthusiasm. His only concern was whether or not his son was alive.

In the sand by the lake they could see the tire tracks, and C.W. started to remember where they were. They began running again. There were fire planes buzzing overhead, and huge bulldozers quickly making firebreaks to contain the flames. They rounded a corner and saw the truck in the distance and began running faster. From afar, C.W. could see Mitch standing in the middle of the trail taking a leak. As the fire plane flew over, Mitch—without a flair for acting—quickly looked over his shoulder as if to say, "Oh shit, what's going on?" C.W. knew he had seen them coming.

C.W. and Big Raymond finally reached the truck to find Mitch and Kevin alright. Then some of the dangdest lying a person could ever hear started.

"What were y'all doing, Mitch?" Big Raymond snarled.

"We weren't doing nothing, we was in the truck listening to Mountain Music." Then the cops showed up. Big Raymond hates cops. He especially hates dumb cops. They got everyone's names and telephone numbers, and then they asked the boys several questions but not a single one that had to do with why the woods were on fire. They were mostly concerned with who was driving the truck.

"My cousin was driving the truck," C.W. said.

"Well where is he?" they asked.

"Oh, he's back at the house."

Boy, they really believed that! Hey, it even sounded stupid to C.W. when he said it, but it was the truth. They assumed C.W. was driving the truck for some reason. The whole thing was such a screwed up mess, and Mitch and Kevin were lying so much that they got the story so turned around that they ended up not being related and had never seen each other before. The police got so aggravated they just decided to let everyone go.

A bulldozer finally showed up and pulled the little "death trap" out of the water. Through a cast of firemen, fire planes, the Louisiana Forest Service, and several Sheriff's Deputies, they managed to locate Mitch and Kevin and safely get them and the truck out. Big Raymond made Mitch ride with him in the front and C.W. and Kevin ride in the back. C.W. was certainly glad about that. He had had all of Big R he could stand for one day. They got back home and Big R began trying to locate his shovel and later went back to work in the yard. Wade was behind the house fishing with an old cane pole and was very curious to find out what had happened. C.W. began to tell the story, not letting Mitch or Kevin talk because neither one of them could tell the truth.

"Han I seen all kinds of stuff going up the road, I didn't know what was going on," Wade said. "Yeah I saw lots of crap, fire trucks and the Sheriff's department. I thought somebody had dun got kilt."

That evening the boys sat around the pond behind the Sonnier's house smoking one of Wade's big joints, which he referred to as a "hog leg," and running the days events over and over in their heads.

The numbing silence was broken as Wade asked, "What the crap did ya'll do while we were gone?"

"We didn't do nothing," Mitch replied.

"Then why did the woods get burnt all to hell?" Wade asked.

"I don't know; you're the ones that left with a lit cigarette."

C.W. began to worry, slightly amazed that there was any worry left in him after what all had happened.

"Man, I know I stomped that cigarette out, but it was so windy anything could have happened," he said.

C.W. and Wade kept drilling the other two with a series of tactful questions. Wade knew they were lying because they were in the same place and had two totally different stories. Finally they cracked.

"Well it was cold out there with that wind blowing so we decided to build a fire," Mitch said.

Wade went berserk.

"You mean to tell me that you lit a fire in thirty mile per hour winds, and you two were gonna let me and C.W. go on believing it was our fault?"

"I'm sorry, han. We was just worried about what Big Raymond was gonna do to us," Mitch said.

Kevin didn't hang around too much after that. It was one of those situations where he thought he could hear his mom calling him and decided it would be a good time to r-u-n-o-f-t. Well that was that, and the boys tried to forget about what happened. It took awhile, especially considering that the intense smell of pine smoke doesn't come off after one shower.

Three or four years later Mitch and C.W. were playing a game of pool at their grandmother's bar on Blue Lake Road, and the subject of the bar-pits came up. Mitch just like his old self had changed his story back to the cigarette being the cause of the fire.

"But you told us it was because ya'll set a fire," C.W. said.

"Aw! We was just messing with y'all".

Ten years down the road on a windy March day, C.W. and his sister were having a birthday party for their mother in Natchitoches and guess who showed up, ole Mitch. He's done been in and out of rehab, jail, you name it; he's got two kids and another on the way. C.W. and Mitch began shootin the breeze about hunting, trapping, and fishing. C.W. mentioned that he was taking a creative writing class and needed an idea for a story.

C.W. said, "You know what story I chose?"

"Naw, han."

"The burning of the bar-pits."

"Damnit, I knew you were gonna say that as soon as you stated talking."

"Yeah, me and old Kevin was standin out there looking like Sammy Sausage Head. That shit went up like a leaking gas pipe as soon as the match hit the ground."

Guess enough time had gone by that Mitch wasn't worried anymore about getting in trouble. All the lies a person tells are easy to forget, but the truth is always there somewhere. This is certainly not the only wild story from over there in Sabine Parish, but at least it is true.



UNTITLED

Robert Braun

Life and limb sprawled, spread, and stretched
To equalize the fragile balance.
A teeter here begs a totter there;
Once achieved, maintenance is merely reflex.
Pure tit for tat, where this juxtaposes that
So the scale remains untipped.
Because that's the point, and balance
Flies it through its proper passage.
But why strive? Nearly futile;
The first grasp of what reflex maintains.
Because a horse that can "gee" but
Can't "haw" is doomed to repeat its circles
Because the pendulum swings back and forth
Between a common connection above both sides.

THE GYNECOLOGIST

Marlinda Pruden

Since the ripe age of 13—or was it 14—when the pomegranate in my belly began shooting out seeds that squirted red-gushing juice, I've always been a little reluctant of down there. You see, I can't even remember the year, let alone the date it all started. There were no congratulatory remarks of womanhood finally achieved or even instructions as to use the tiny diapers that line your panties. I chalk it up to mom being out of town and living with four boys. I guess I just like to pretend to be one of "the guys," even though I am way too emotional, especially when those monthly visitations occur. Now that I think back upon my history of denial, it seems odd that I should feel so comfortable in the gynecologist's office, naked, my clothes folded neatly on the chair across the room and white-star necklace sitting like a precipice atop my bra. And I, in a paper gown (which despite what anyone tells you is quite fashionable if you have blue-green eyes), await the doctor's prompt return. She knocks on the door and asks if I am "decent." I scoff at her haphazard attempt to lighten the mood and reply, "Just barely," making it apparent her re-entry into the room is not anticipated but allowed. She walks in and pulls two metal stirrups from the inside of the examination table next to the warning label: **Caution May Be Hot to Touch**. And as she lifts my ankles into the end pieces, I wish they were—instead of freezing cold. She tells me to lie back on the table, her hand on my shoulder for support. Untying my gown for the breast exam, I faintly recall lying in this position before and zone out of the whole procedure until she says with a slight hesitation, "You're so soft." Without delay, she quickly covers this faux-pas with a mutter of something about not drinking much caffeine, to which I vehemently agree. I escape again from her kneading my breasts like dough for making bread and the slight feel of unease to her blatant sexual preference. I remember what a friend told me about women and how they mess with him and how much he wished they would just "Go straight for the shit." At this moment she ends this portion of the checkup as if she read my thoughts from a ticker-tape playing across my forehead, and I felt just then the unpleasantness my friend so wantonly desired: fucked.



FAREWELL

Andi McKay

But she used to say:
Fare-thee-well and folly
Lolly doodle day back when
She was young and now she
Wears her fingers in gloves
And her eyes covered in hats
When she purses her lips,
Red like pomegranate, treacherous.
In pigtails she used to sing,
Her fingers laced with silver, gold
Rings from the twenty-five-cent gift
Sections at the store on the corner. In pigtails
She would sing and in high heels she

Bargains:

Farewell

Farewell.
Dictionary expresses in
Four lines, so shall I
Goodbye.

Farewell, he says
Mouth like stars, speckled
And fascinating, he says:
The scar on her thigh is shaped
Like a seven. It's her ticket
To eternity. So the words say, so
She shapes the scar with her finger, second
Row back in the church pew. The scar
On her bedpost says: *S.S. Bedtanic*
When it rocks back and forth as she falls
Fast asleep, late at night, she mutters
Of angels, she drank
So much she couldn't separate drams,
But at night she prays, with her fingers
Folded together, and when she used to say
To her friend: "This is the church and these
Are the people," she did not have the scar
On her arm, no reflection
Of her safety net, her ticket
To heaven.

BATS FROM A LESSON IN FLIGHT

Larrie King

The couch was itchy and its pillows sunk under my weight. The lights were off in the ouse, but I still turned toward the inside of the couch so that I couldn't see into the hallway. I never liked looking into that dark hallway, even though my mother and younger brother were lying next to me on a mattress—lying there like a human moat along my castle's shadow. It was normal, I supposed, for other twelve-year-olds to be afraid of ghosts and demons in the dark of the night. It was not normal for a twelve-year-old to sleep on a couch instead of a bed, and it was not normal for a family to sleep in a living room and not their bedrooms. This was the way it had been for us since I could remember. Beds cost money. Food cost money. Clothes cost money. And my mother had none.

1600 Allison Street was my address then. It wasn't a poor neighborhood, but it was still far from the prominent displays of wealth featured several streets behind our own. Here the roads were straight and gray and ugly. I remember the awe I felt whenever I passed the clean, black, curvy streets of their neighborhoods. I hated being aware of my social status. I always knew who I was allowed to talk to at school, where I would have to sit on the bus, and how long I would have to wait outside of my house after school each day. I was rarely an envious child, but I definitely knew what I didn't have. I hated the embarrassment of not having the things I knew I was supposed to—like boy's clothing.

There was always some magic when I could stand to think about what life could be like—what everyone else's lives were already like. I isolated myself inside. I pretended to know more than I did, and I made believe I owned the things I needed. This was the way I worked my own magic. I caught the bus a mile away from my house. I hand washed my favorite clothes over and over, so that I could at least wear what I wanted and be comfortable. I stole food from the fridge in my house to take to school, so I could eat lunch with the kids who brought colorful sweets and fresh sandwiches in plastic bags for

lunch. I stole money from my mother's stash and bought candy with it to give away to anyone who wanted to pretend to be my friend—if only for the length of our recess.

I stepped off the stale-smelling bus and onto the cold damp concrete, making my way into the building as stealthily as possible. Ah, warmth inside. I waved a few “hellos” to other students and a couple of my favorite teachers, and made my way to the cafeteria. School breakfast was always better than school lunch. I grabbed my tray and loaded it with whatever was being served that day—warm biscuits and spicy sausage, and the ever-so-popular milk bag.

The only other thing I remember about that day is the bats. I made my way up the stairs to the school's courtyard, a makeshift holding cell for students who got to school early. Everyone was whispering, or shrieking in disgust, or laughing, or silent, like me. Were the three brick walls that surrounded the yard speckled with tar? No. Something just moved . . .

There were 50 or more bats crusted onto the bricks. I don't know how they got there, or how they died, or even if they were really bats. I was petrified, and awed. The teachers came around and moved us into the gym inside. The bats were gone by recess.

SHE PRAYED

O. Chandler Crook

She clutched her teddy bear
pulled her covers to her chin
and glued her eyes to the ceiling.
She prayed, *God please bring back my puppy.*
Tomorrow Lucky would return home wrapped in a plastic garbage bag.
Her mother said, *The Lord needed him home.*

She sat on the porch swing
swatting away mosquitoes
and sobbed into the starless night.
She prayed, *God let my brother be okay.*
Tomorrow his comrades would salute
while his frigid body was loaded on a plane.
Her mother said, *The Lord works in mysterious ways.*

She paced on the fourth floor
waiting for any news
and tried to make herself not shake.
She prayed, *God give her a few more days.*
Tomorrow a sheet would cover her grandma's face;
the cancer won the race.
Her mother said, *The Lord knows what he's doing.*

She went into labor;
drove herself to the hospital
she knew she was two months too soon.
She prayed, *God let my child be okay.*
Tomorrow she would decide
what to engrave on his tombstone.
Her mother said, *The Lord has his reasons.*

She planned how to do it
chugged some Southern Comfort
and decided to go through with it.
She didn't pray, she said, *Fuck you!*
Tomorrow she would be found
dangling from her rafters.
Her mother said nothing.



TRAPPED

Devon Ainsworth

LATE

Michael Wendel

Waking in a panic,
looking at the glow
of the numbers flashing,
7:50. 7:50. 7:50.

Seventeen minutes
to make the 8:07 train.
She jolts up in haste,
frantically dressing,
sprinting out the door,
driving at warp speed,
narrowly missing
the train by one minute,
watching the shrinking
faces enviously.

The booming Voice:
"All trains going to Penn Station
are hereby canceled due to
a sudden derailment."

Sighing, reaching for the
phone, calling Ashley,
explaining, apologizing,
regrettably breaking
their lunch plans.

Sadly standing in line
at De-Café mournfully,
accepting her latte.

Sinking down into the
comforting embrace of an
oversized chair.

Delving into the depths
of her book,
thinking
about pulling into the
trade center concourse,
meeting up with Ashley.

Another day,
a better day.

Making due with her latte

and paperback,
sinking into the chair.

Suddenly drawn
from her melancholy
by gasps,
screams,
and wails.

She looks
at the crowd gathering
around the TV,
tears filling her eyes.

The realization
of the images flashing.
Smoke rising,
people falling,

Another
plane
crashing.

Mouth gaping open,
latte spilling,
soaking
into the carpet.

Thinking of those
faces
on the train.

Those she had envied.

So many unforeseen
obstacles
preventing,

seemingly
detering
an invisible hand.

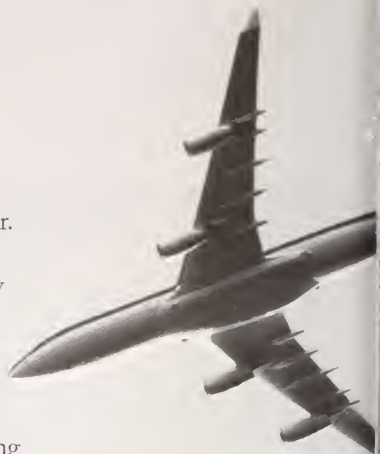
Strategically saving.

Seemingly divine intervention.

Why her?

Why? Tears streaming, she calls Ashley.

An unending dial tone
answers a world away.



THE GUISE OF GLORY

Robert Braun

What marvelous mixed-up monsters I have made,
Wrought with guilts and goals from delusions of my grandeur.
Their own misgivings have guided them in the wrong direction,
Which is any direction taken on my behalf.

What creation has ever correctly comprehended
The methods behind its own manifest madness?
Asking accomplishment of such an assignment
Would be like asking a man to bite a basketball.

But They've convinced themselves thoroughly that
What hasn't been revealed is so damn delicious,
They'll bite the very first thing forced on them
Labeled "The Finest Fantastic Flavor Found"

But all carrying this label share the same wrong ingredient:
Some notion of "I" who cannot be known.



BREATHE

Amber Istre



A TIME TO DIE

Lora Sheppard

Sometimes, when I'm feeling particularly imaginative, I think of Death and I have this dance. This play. Wondering how he is going to drop by this time and if I should make coffee for our regular visit. Sometimes I wonder if it will be me next, or one of my sisters, my parents, my best friend. The past few years have taught me life is nothing but fleeting and that it always moves, like an eternal river.

Styx.

I first encountered Death when I was seven or eight—that age where independence starts to assert itself, but a child is still tied to imagination. It was a family vacation to Gulf Shores, and though I still didn't know how to swim, I grew brave enough to put my feet in the surf and wade out a bit.

It wouldn't be until years later that I learned about undertow, that drag in the opposite direction of the water that could suck even experienced swimmers under the sea and drown them.

All I remember is tumbling head over feet, seeing nothing but brown water and intermittent light motes and sand, and the water was in my ears, roaring in this deafening cacophony and...

Oh God, I can't breathe...I'm going to die, please God...don't let me die...

...being spit back up on shore by the ocean as if I was something that tasted particularly bad, coughing up and gagging on dirty water, eyes stinging from salt.

No one had seen me go under.

I have been terrified of drowning ever since, and refuse to venture out if I can't see my feet or the ocean floor. But I had felt it—the cold prickle on the back of my neck and sliding down my spine like ice water.

After all, a person's first brush with Death is one they never forget.

My father and I are alike in the sense that we detest wakes and funerals, much for the same reason we both hate hospitals.

You sit there and do nothing. Sit there and grieve and stand around and look uncomfortable.

We also refuse to go near open caskets.

"I like for the last image of that person to be how I saw them when they were alive," my father explained once. "Not of them in a hospital bed or in a casket, looking nothing like how I know them."

The first funeral I remember was my great-grandmother Nossek—Mom's grandmother. I didn't know her personally, only through stories and by reputation. So, when she died on my fifteenth birthday and we took the four-hour drive to Houston to go to the funeral, I wasn't particularly upset.

The only memory I have from that trip other than crazy Aunt Betty dressing like a thirty-year-old circa 1965 and Uncle Carl commenting that I had "Nossek eyes"—whatever the hell that meant—was of the trip to the church in the car with my mom and younger sister.

Not knowing the city, Mom was following close behind my grandfather—whom we affectionately called "Fa"—when a man in a monstrous truck tried to cut us off. When Mom refused to budge, he got . . . belligerent.

Honking his horn and showing liberal amounts of his middle finger, he abruptly sped up and tried to cut us off again, which made my younger sister Kelli grow dead pale and threaten to hyperventilate, gripping the door handle so tightly her knuckles were white.

"OH MY GOD, WERE GONNA DIE! WERE GONNA DIE RIGHT HERE IN HOUSTON!"

"We are not going to die, Kelli," Mom snapped, trying not to laugh, as Kelli's temper was apt to blow with little provocation.

As an older sister, I didn't really care.

"Shut up," she snapped, when I wouldn't stop laughing.

We still bring it up at family gatherings.

* * *

The next funeral would be less than a year later.

Losing my grandfather, Poppa, left a visceral ache that wouldn't fade for years. It was the first time I lost someone close to me.

However, like many things in my family, the funeral didn't go as expected. Not only did my father and my Aunt Susan arrive after funeral plans had been made due to Dad's stationing in Algiers and my uncle's stationing in Germany, but my other aunt had completely disregarded my grandfather's wish of cremation to have him buried. My grandmother was too distraught to say anything or to even care at the moment. It made the whole air vibrate like a drawn wire.

My oldest cousin's daughter was eight when Poppa died, and therefore not only out of the loop on familial tension but also about the process of burying the dead in general. Despite my aversion to open caskets, she had wanted to go up and see, to say goodbye.

I carefully kept all expression off of my face as we stood next to the coffin, as Kelli stood next to me and I lifted the eight-year-old up so she could peer over the side.

Before I realized what happened, she had reached out and poked his hand with an inquisitive finger before looking up at me, eyes all innocence.

"Hey Lora, why's his skin hard?"

I choked, not sure what to say, but was immensely relieved when my cousin overheard and took over, grasping her daughter's hand.

"Sarah, now's not the time," she said gently, but with a firm undertone. "We'll look up 'embalming' when we get home."

As they walked away, I gave in to temptation and reached out to graze fingertips over his hand.

I flinched and jerked back.

His skin was cold.

* * *

The years settled and time passed, as it was wont to do.

There is a quote by Robert Frost that says, "In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on."

And it did. I turned sixteen: Kelli started high school the same month we moved to a town called Mandeville and hour away from Baton Rouge. I made new friends, kept the old ones who mattered, and learned to appreciate my personality and my family as I grew out of my rebellious, one-one-understands-me-it's-not-a-phase-this-is-how-I-am! phase. My senior year, I went to school, worked at my first jobs, went to the movies and stayed out late with friends. Worried about college applications. It was all so painfully, blissfully normal.

Then Fa got sick. Cancer of the colon, with additional spots on his liver. If he had actually gone to a doctor when he started feeling bad, the trials of the next three years probably wouldn't have been as bad. However, being who he was, Fa was endlessly stubborn and hated doctors. He would soon have more attention from the medical profession than he had ever wanted.

Though he had the infected areas removed surgically, Richard Nossek was by no means a healthy man. He had to have arteries in his neck cleared of plaque—one was 90 percent blocked—and it was discovered that he had atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. He was constantly in and out of the hospital, though he kept his spirits high. One surgery took veins out of his arms to replace some of the blocked veins in his left leg when he began to lose circulation. It didn't take very well, so he had his toes amputated before gangrene could set in.

"They should just put Velero on me," he joked once, as he sat in his Lazy-Boy and worked his crossword puzzles, with Little Bit, my grandparent's curly-tailed Chihuahua, sitting happily in his lap as Pat Shingleton announced the news.

He ended up having to have his left leg amputated below the knee.

Though he was so sick, I was never afraid that Death would come to claim him: he was still so strong and stalwart, an always-fixed figure in my childhood and adolescence, and would stay that way for several more years.

My aunt, my mom's sister, was a different story.

In the middle of Fa's medical ordeal, the doctors told her that she had ovarian cancer that had already advanced to Stage 4, evident by the infected fluid in her lungs. They told

her that while they couldn't determine the time she had left, it didn't look good and started her on extensive chemotherapy immediately. She swore that she would live two years — two years was all she needed to see my cousin Ryan, her son, graduate from high school.

She managed nearly four.

The six months before her death, I could feel it—feel him—coming, like a prickling tap dance down my spine, raising the hair on the back of my neck. Though I thought it, I only ever said it aloud once.

She's not going to live another year.

I had learned when Poppa died that if Death was coming, really coming, there was nothing you could do to stop him. Fighting him was futile.

But somehow, fighting was infinitely more satisfying than just waiting.

I was in Natchitoches, Louisiana, at Northwestern State University after having transferred universities my junior year, and it was November when I received my mother's call.

They gave her two months.

When doctors give someone two months or some equally minute amount of time, it is usually a maximum.

She passed away three weeks later, the day after Thanksgiving.

Her wake and funeral were a somber set of affairs, her death having been so abrupt to most of my family that we were all stunned and numb. A cleaving that was so simple and clean, it was as if she was there one day and gone the next.

Or rather, there one instant and gone in another.

I sighed as I dumped sugar into my coffee while I stood next to one of my cousins in Greenoak Memorial's small but well-stocked coffee room.

She gave me a jaundiced eye. "Good God, how much sugar do you put in yours?"

I gave her a puzzled look, before staring at my coffee, now a light tan from creamer. "Enough so I can drink it?"

Her lip quirked, which is what I had been aiming for. Everyone was so...somber.

I hadn't wanted to go back to the chapel while there was an open casket, where she lay there and looked nothing like herself, like some Holocaust survivor, all gaunt and wan with too-obvious makeup on her face and a starched suit I could never remember her wearing.

There is one thing that I will always remember about Paula Nossek Usey's service, and it has nothing to do with the actual burial.

The wake was over, the chapel emptying, and the casket was now closed, so I went forward to say my goodbye. My tiny grandmother, whom we called Momar, my uncle, and Mom were all facing away, and my older sister Erin was waiting for me to finish so we could get in her car and go eat dinner with the family, since we were all finally together after several months.

I leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the varnished wood.

"Bye, Aunt Paula," I whispered as I leaned up...

...and knocked the casket by accident, causing the crucifix sitting on top to slide over the other side.

SHITSHITSHIT! You have a klutz attack NOW?

Erin watched in wide-eyed horror as I lunged over the coffin and snatched the crucifix before it could fall and set it back in its rightful place.

I looked around.

Mom, Momar, and my uncle were all staring in the opposite direction. The chapel was empty, everyone having gathered outside in the hallway, talking.

THANK GOD.

Erin's mouth worked for a moment, as if trying to find words, before she sighed. "How about we keep this just between us?"

I sighed in relief before I grinned. "Deal."

She grinned back at me, green eyes alight with mirth. "Aunt Paula would be laughing at you right now."

I snorted. "She probably still is."

My sister was still smiling when we got in the car.

Several weeks later, back at school as I packed up for the trip home for Christmas, I stared at the dress clothes in my closet before wandering into the living room where my best friend, Cheryl, was doing her homework. She looked up when I spoke.

"Is it really morbid of me to think that maybe I should bring dress clothes with me just in case someone else dies?"

She stared at me steadily, sage green eyes serious, before shaking her head.

"The way your family's been lately? No, I don't think so."

"Hm."

But I did pack dress pants. Just in case.

* * *

A year passed, and November came again. The same day one of my oldest friends got married, I waited long enough for pictures, seeing her off on her honeymoon, and saying goodbye to old friends before going to my grandparents' house to change out of my dress.

Erin met me there, and she drove to the hospital.

As we all gathered at the hospital—all of us—we were there as Fa tried to sleep through the pain and began slipping into a coma.

I felt nothing but cold. I had told Cheryl earlier that night, "I don't know if I can do another funeral so soon."

Feeling that familiar cold, that familiar dread, I knew I didn't have any choice.

Goodbye, Fa. I love you. See you on the other side, I thought before I left that night.

I went back to school for the last week before Thanksgiving break, my mother promising to call if anything changed so I would know if I had to drive in early or not. Every time my phone rang I jumped, and every time it was my mother, I dreaded what she would say.

I packed my bags, and drove home Thursday morning.

We still aren't sure why his health declined so rapidly that year, but some of us thought it might have been that the pain of losing his daughter before his own death had something to do with it. Nonetheless, he died days away from the first anniversary of her death.

At the plot site, outside in nasty, chilly, damp weather as my hair whipped around my face, I stared at his coffin as everyone eddied around after the service was finished. I took

a rose, placed it on his coffin, and pressed a kiss to the casket.

Goodnight sweet prince, and may flights of angels lead you to your rest.

* * *

Though the first Christmas without Fa was difficult, life did what it usually does. Moves on.

Sometimes too fast.

Grandma—my father's mother—had been in an assisted living facility for the past two years. She was always sick, in and out of the hospital more than Fa had been.

One day I told my mother with finality, "She's not going to live another two years."

My mother snorted, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "I think she'll live at least another ten," she replied. "She's too afraid to die, so she's going to hang on as long as she can."

"I'm just saying."

I had never told my mother the uncanny feeling I get when I know people are going to die. Last time I visited Grandma, I had felt that cold finger draw itself down my spine, that cold hand grip my heart, something build in me like static electricity before leaving me empty.

Unlike the times before, I knew Death would be nothing but beneficial. Grandma was suffering, and there was nothing that could help her. At least, in Death, she wouldn't hurt anymore.

I got the call the March after Fa's funeral. Grandma had passed away, and though she was nearly immobile in her bed, somehow she had thrown the sheets off and swung a leg over her other as if trying to get up.

Taking Death's hand and walking out. Time to go.

Her ceremony was interesting for the fact that my dad and Aunt Susan had been at odds with my other aunt since Grandma had to be admitted into a facility. My aunt had accused my father of stealing Grandma's money, my mother of lying to her, and had even told the funeral home director—Jeff, whom we now knew by name—not to let my parents "cremate her to take the cheap way out."

The anger was a slow bubble underneath my skin, but I welcomed it. It kept the grief I had felt at the wake the night before at bay.

I used to have nightmares where I would wake up crying because I was at Grandma's funeral. Now I was living it. But I was older this time.

The weather was cool and the sunshine bright, flowers and green shooting out as spring approached quickly.

I looked up. "She would have loved the weather today," I said.

Aunt Susan looked up as well, a brief smile playing at her lips. "Yeah, she would have."

Not wanting to part with bitterness from my former godmother, I gave my estranged aunt a hug before I left.

It was the only clemency I could offer her.

Seeing that, my cousin gave me a hug of her own. "Proud of you," she said.

I smiled. Well, damn. Maybe I was finally growing up.

* * *

I have felt Death come when I expected him.

I have also felt it as he forcibly ripped someone away.

In July, I received a call from three of my high school friends. Later on, I looked online and confirmed it.

My friend, Adam Murray, a Marine Corps infantryman, had been shot and killed in Iraq.

Death, you bastard, I thought, furious. Couldn't just leave it alone, could you?

It felt like someone punched a hole in my heart and I cut myself on the jagged pieces of where it had been. He had been like a younger brother to me. He was one of mine. It hurt in a way the others had never managed too, not even Aunt Paula's.

"I think your sister's upset," I heard Mom whisper to Kelli once.

Oh, you think? I wanted to retort, but kept my silence.

My friend Annie and I went through the stages of grief. Disbelief. Doubt. Anger. Depression.

If I could've done something . . . why him? . . . was it really?

He was buried in Arlington Cemetery. I wasn't been able to go.

During the anger portion of the program, Annie tore apart a dead tree in her fiancé's back yard with an axe. I wished I had been able to join her.

Instead, I had to go to a bachelorette party. Oh, fun and joy.

As I sat in my friend Rachel's car on the way to The Varsity, a local club in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, we talked about death. The past November, she had also lost her grandfather.

He had been hit by a bus. Suddenly ripped away. Much as Adam had been.

She looked at me in the dark of her old Lexus, brown eyes remote. "Is it easier when you know it's coming?"

Since I was evidently an authority on the subject, I thought for a moment, giving her question the utmost care and thought. She deserved no less.

"Yeah," I finally answered. "Yeah, it is."

That night I took my first shot—Grey Goose—in his name.

Alright kid. See you when I get there. Love you.

* * *

I'm not sure when Death will stop by next. There was a moment of fear when Cheryl was hit by a truck on campus—and Rachel had a panic attack before anyone could calm her down—but when I was allowed to go back into the ER room and see her, my fear subsided.

Not yet. I thought in relief. Not yet.

It could be anytime. I've learned this. I'm also not stupid enough to think I'll be prepared for it. I hug Mom and kiss her every time I see her, tell my parents I love them, hold my sisters tight. Visit and call friends more often than I did before.

But, I'll leave the coffee on. Just in case.



SPARKY

Donna Barrere



DOLLHOUSE DEUH

Lisa Rachal



MERRY, MERRY, MERRY

Amanda Roe



KAREN

Adam Sanchez



LOVE FOR OIL

Atichart Pinrut

EVERYTHING IS FINE

April Dickson Braun

We'll wait until tomorrow
To really make that call.
We'll wait until it's way too late
To give a shit at all.

Welcome to the dream of dreams:
There is nothing here to fear.
Just use, reuse, and then abuse—
It's ok, you're in the clear.

You'll never see the horror
Of all color turned to grey.
It's none of your concern now, see,
But your kids will have to pay.

So just jump into your SUVs,
And drive into the sun.
"Don't look at me," I know you'll say,
"I'm not the only one."

"Don't hate me for the way I think.
I'm only one small mind."
The problem is—you see, kind sir—
There are millions of your kind.

THE TRUTH

DREAMS KNOW

Victoria Krista Jenkins

... then I opened my eyes
and watched the misty glow
dance around my room
like an amber haze of smoke.

... once I thought I saw a boy
standing in the doorway
holding a dog on a chain leash.
I remember the teeth of

the boy gleamed brightly
despite the dark of the room
his eyes burned like flames
when he freed the dog from his chains.

... suddenly leaping towards my bed
the animal was ready for the kill
coming so close to my face I smelled
his hot, foul breath and thought I could feel

the weight of his body
as it pressed down on mine.
screaming and kicking
I opened my eyes

and only the dark of my room
was there as I struggled to clear my head
and pretend I didn't hear the floor creak
as the shadow moved slowly away from my bed.

POT POEM

Connor the Great

I hold the serpent to my mouth
As the salamander's tongue licks the bowl.
One harsh kiss
And another;
The serpent slithers from hand to hand about the room,
Just like those churches we went to
Where they danced and sang and fell out cold onto the floor,
And the spirit moved among them
The way it did in the beginning
Over the dark waters.
The serpent we hold now,
Once clear as a mountain brook,
Turns the colors of an autumn day,
From limpid to golden,
To Baltic amber, to good brandy,
And finally to the thickest, fullest blue.
The color of the sky you remember as a kid
On your first day of summer vacation,
The kind of sky that fills your mouth,
Rushes down your throat,
And slams into the pit of your stomach
Once your eyes are flowed over.



DISSIPATING TEXTURES:

RED AND GREEN

Rhonda Gleason-Pritts

BEATAE MEMORIAE

Marlinda Pruden

your voice sounded how
a dusty record turns tables in the attic
covered in built up memories.
needle twitches arm over old wounds
dank, must hangs
spider's web suspended in the air
as tune with slanted roof
bounces scalloped edges echo.
phonographic recollections
awake from chest's
moth-bitten shawl
while rocking-chair squeaks
metronomic beats
synchronous to melodic cadence
of the heart remembered,
fondly.

THE TRANSCENDENT

Anna Raye Jennings

Inescapable.
So you say,
But how you elude me!
I find you ungraspable:
Mathematics, your symphony
Colors spanning infinity.
Supernova of the mind
In its fragile, earthbound state—
Your kaleidoscopic fury.



APOLOGY

Megan Davis

Make subtle reparations.
Acknowledge.
Hear the bell chime twelve,
Not to midday, but to morning—
To resurrection,
To forgiveness,
All at the command of your one word.
Seal those cracked foundations.
Remove the shrapnel
Underneath my skin,
And the cuts will heal.

I promise.

BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

Theresa Dollman

Tear apart all your dreams
Blown away like New Orleans
Abandon ship
This one's going down

It's your favorite shirt
It's in the wash
With my newly dyed tie-dyed cloth
Rewash and rewash
It will never be the same

Oh Man
I lost him
And he was the closest thing
To love
I hate that stuff
My greedy heart
Just can't get enough

I miss you most through the night
You're on my mind by early light
And in my dreams you still wanted me

But I wake up to real life
Cut apart by a dull knife
Clutched in my hand
And I can't let it go

What if I picked up all those pieces?
And we put them all together
It might grow to something good
Or even turn to something better
I know where I went wrong and I promise you
I'll never
Go down that road again



30°10'19"N, 89°43'58"W

J. Callac

DISCOVERING WRLDEN

Danielle Fromenthal

I was there. I was right there. I ran my hand against the cool grayish-white sand, smooth and damp. I imagined snow—and it might as well have been snow, with its cold, surreal purity. It would've been all the same to me, in my state of astonished delight. It was here. It wasn't gone. I continued to run my hands through the damp, cold sand; the chill air of November no longer a hindrance to my pleasure. I stabbed my fingers into the grainy substance, disturbing its sedimentary appearance. There were no signs of human life.

"It's like I'm the first person to ever be here," my voice echoed through the forest.

A splash.

Momentarily broken from the spell of the pristine sand, I looked ahead of me to the mirrored water of the bayou: evergreens decorated with a few deciduous trees of red, yellow, and orange rippled and distorted against the stillness of the forest. No one was around.

"This might as well be the entire world—I wish it was."

The party was too loud.

Friends-Giving. Not normally my type of occasion, but my friends were so genuinely excited about the bring-your-own-booze potluck Thanksgiving event that I couldn't bear not showing up. I sat on a cold hardwood floor for what seemed like hours, waiting for the turkey or pudding or whatever to finish cooking; I was getting edgy. The gathering, attended by twenty-something rather dramatic college students, was a combination of bad pop music and the dull roar of voices trying to compete with this

music. How did all the biggest spazzes in town end up at the same party?

I spotted some quiet-looking people in a corner of the room. Score. I know the girl. Seeking solace, I retreated into the fortress of black clothing, black hair, and black makeup, built by the quaint couple in the corner.

This guy looks familiar.

"Have we met?"

"Yeah, I saw you out in Kisatchie once."

Oh yeah. The hot ranger. I remember now.

"You know, that whole place is destroyed."

"What?"

"Yeah, it got totally flooded. It's just, like, gone. The bayou overflowed by like fifteen feet and the bluffs fell in. There's nothing but sand now."

I sat in disbelief. The Kisatchie Bayou region was very special to me. I loved that place. It had been a very important part of my life for the past few years. The news of its destruction hurt me deeply. Trying desperately to hide the emotions I was feeling, I retreated under the guise of needing more beer.

The Bayou itself had been mostly shallow, flowing through little more than a cranny at some points, but being mysteriously deep at others. Over the many, many years of the bayou's life, bluffs ranging from ten to twenty feet, maybe even higher at some points, were carved into the sandstone and clay, shaped by the cool, clear, ever-running water. I discovered this place in my fifth year of college in Natchitoches.

I had always known a national forest existed in the area and that there were places there to hike and swim, but being disenchanted by the boring lifestyle and scenery of the area, I never believed any bayou in North Louisiana would be worth going to. On the few occasions when I was feeling adventurous, I could never find the place. I would drive in random directions for miles and miles following brown National Forest signs, but never finding anything to do.

One semester, when I was going particularly crazy trapped in the small town of Natchitoches, crowded to bursting with college students, soccer moms in SUVs, and backward country-types who insisted on never agreeing with anyone, I finally made my way to Kisatchie Bayou. After years of living in Natchitoches, hanging out with mostly other out-of-towners, I had befriended a few locals who claimed they could take me to the good spots of Kisatchie.

On a beautiful summer day a few friends escorted me to my first experience with Kisatchie Bayou. From the very first moment I stepped foot onto the parking lot at the recreational area, I was in love. The tall pines, sandy trails, and musical waters enchanted me. I never thought anything so beautiful could exist in our shitty state.

It was like I stepped out of the car and into a different world, an ancient world, a free world. The trees and sand and bluffs and the fresh, fresh air of the forest engulfed me. I was swooning. But even more enchanting was the water. Down the bluff, a set of makeshift stairs led to the base of Kisatchie Bayou, a nice spot with a sandy beach and shallow water.

Growing up in South Louisiana, among its swamps and “real” bayous, I have always felt a strong connection to water. My father and uncles, and their father before them had all been commercial fishermen. We spent many holidays on tiny sandbars formed in the powerful Atchafalaya River, and sometimes a weekend “camping” really meant helping out on the shrimp boat. But this water was different from the water I had grown up on. It wasn’t deep, dark, and dangerous. It was clear, cool, and shallow, and the sound of the rushing water over the smooth stones and intermittent miniature cascades was hypnotic. I spent most of that day lying on my back in the sand in about an inch of cool running water, worshipping the sun, the forest, and my life.

This was what I had been missing. This place. My depression and stress characteristic of a long, rugged undergraduate existence washed downstream, carried away with the maple leaves and pine needles by the cool water of the Bayou. From that point onward, I made the forty-minute drive to Kisatchie Bayou every chance I could. To think that the tiny bayou I so loved had risen high enough to cover twenty-foot bluffs and flood even further was both mind-blowing and heartbreaking. I had to see for myself.

My roommate and I began the drive to Kisatchie Bayou on the Saturday following Friends-Giving. Excited as always during the journey to my favorite retreat, I tried to ignore the feeling of impending doom, but sorrow was threatening to overcome.

“It’s gone,” I kept thinking, “it’s gone.”

Another thirty minutes down the road and my stomach was in knots. A cold nervousness overpowered the calm demeanor I was trying to maintain, as visions of sand dunes and wastelands flooded my brain. We turned into Kisatchie National Forest, blazing down the red-dirt road in my white Eclipse, Jim Morrison belting out “Road House Blues.” Everything looked normal so far, but this still did not ease my aching mind.

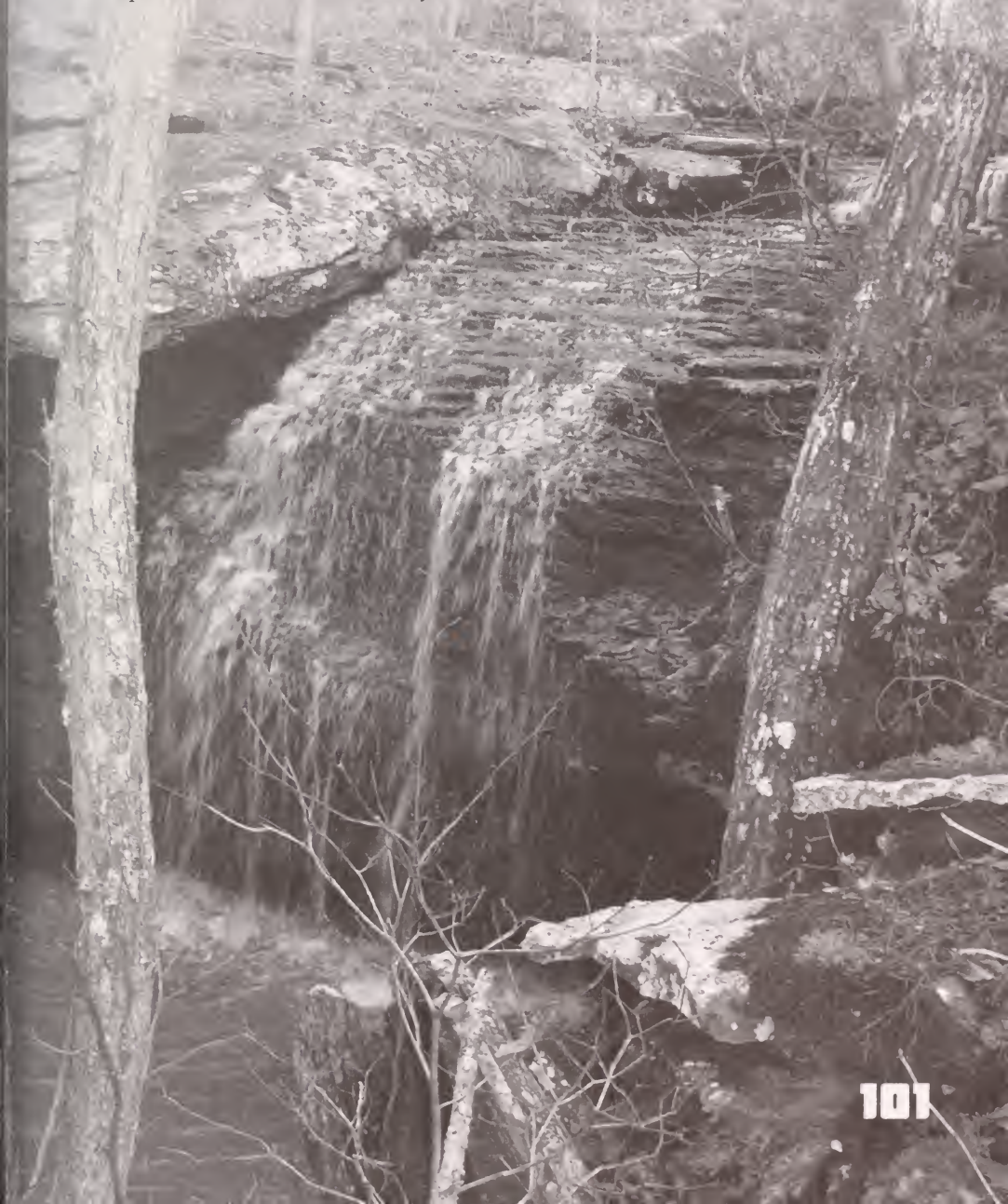
“I can’t believe it’s gone.”

A left turn. The parking lot. I still can’t see. I step down out of the car. Still, no signs of damage or salvation visible. Even through my nervous suspense, the sweet air of the forest envelops me, and I felt calm. Journeying down from the parking lot, I can see the edge of the sand-stone bluffs that border my scared waters. They seem to be intact, although the man-made wooden fences are mangled and destroyed. I climb up, and look over the bluff. I can finally see the Bayou rushing below me through the gray November afternoon. The beauty is breathtaking, every subsequent breath sweet and healing.

Everything was as I remembered it, but everything was different. The massive flood had washed the region clean. Nature had changed her face, and I was here to witness it.

The waters rushed on. At least five feet higher than I had ever seen it, the sound

of the moving water carried me away just as it always had. It was apparent something massive had taken place here. For once, there was no litter to be seen. No beer cans, no dirty diapers, no empty cigarette packages or lost socks. Everything not of the Earth had been washed clean. Exhilarated, I continued down the trail, excited to see more of this newly created beauty, unfouled by human hands. Man-made stairs and picnic tables were mangled, stuck high in trees or just gone, but the glory of the trees and the sand and the bayou still remained. A beautiful birch, decorated with the colors of autumn, sand unable to support its majestic size, was felled. I walked down the length of its massive trunk to the waters below. I was reminded of the nature-worship of Emerson and Thoreau; and I imagined Walden. Only waters as sacred, clear, and free as the legendary Walden Pond could compare with the vision of Beauty before me.



FOAM

Jessica Folse

Foam passionately met!
Momentum building—rushing forward.
Stroking, thrusting wood.
Hearts beating; blood pumping.

Slightly ebbing,
But not yet calm.
Foam. Wood. Tense sweating palm.

Climax—constant bumping.
White, foamy, flow—hot, wet.

Slower—still hard breathing, chests heaving.
Navigating flood.
Less thrusting; still stroking.

Gentler breathing.
Hear Nature's psalm.

Approaching complete calm.
Last thrust; foam receding.

Climb out, unload packed tent.
Fire building—finally sleeping.
Dreams. White waves conquered.

WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY

Kelli Fontenot

It's simple, really.
You lied because you are a
coward. You realized that if you followed your
Discovery, it would ruin everything you had,
and now you think that no one on Earth has felt pain
like you've felt it. You justify your bonds
[and busy schedule, bad habits, brokenness]
with lies and syntax.
You're a father like the ones in the saddest poetry;
there is so much that I could say to counter you
and the things you hide.
This is supposed to be a learning experience.
You have gray-haired knowledge beyond my
imagination's longest limbs. I want you to
tell me everything.
Who are you pretending to be?
What have you been dreaming of?
Is there some lesson I should learn from this?
Admit to me what i already know about you.
Confess the kind of confessions that you would
barely have the courage to write in a bathroom stall
because Nobody (not even the rain)
could manage to understand you,
your mind's galaxies,
the incredible darkness in your heart,
the incredible snow-capped cold of your voice,
and there is so much that I want
to ask you.



I SMOKED WHILE I WROTE THIS

O. Chandler Crook

Are you trying to make immorality extinct?
Because I hate to be the one to tell you
there are a lot more problems
than me having a stogie at the bar

What about the couple in the corner
rubbing each other's genitals
He's whispering bittersweet bullshit in her ear
I think you should be the one to tell her mother
about her visit to the clinic
Explain AIDS
Explain to her mother that it's OK
her daughter threw her first grandbaby away

Tell me again
about tackling this important issue
of saving lives
by banning smoking at the bar

Look at the man alone on the barstool
For twenty five years
he hasn't said no to a drink
and now he'll never say no
His only son died
in a war he was too young to understand
He signed up for free tuition
He signed up for an education he'll never have
His last words to his father
I'll give them the freedom we have
His father's next round should go on your tab

Tell me again
About tackling this important issue
of saving lives
by banning smoking at the bar

Notice the two kids no older than fifteen
The only thing they know of their father
are the blue bruises on their belted backs
The only thing they know of their mother
are the pills they now eat
Now here they are at the bar
buying a bag of white candy treats
from the man who beats off
to little girls in frilly dresses
Tonight you should read
a bedtime story to them nostalgically

I propose excerpts from the No Child Left Behind Act
Do you think you're saving me?
Because I hate to be the one to tell you
I'm not the one who needs be saved
from this stogie I have at the bar



THE KERRTBREKER

Atichart Pinrut

BOTH SIDES

Andi McKay

I am the mirror from both sides, from where she combs
Her hair (where last night's shampoo remains) strand by strand,
Where she sings to Bing Crosby crooning, reverberating the glass
From both sides.

I am reflector and reflected, as she is, I am, straightening the lace,
Rearranging her bracelets. I am Alice in Wonderland when she
Is pressing her salty fingertips to see if I am magnified
Or fabricated,

When she is undressing, considering which pill (big or small) to fit
Through the door this evening, when she is making sure
No one is watching.

I am she but she is never,
Never me.

I am the photograph on the wall, changing shapes and colors
Every instant. I am the history of a moment when she is smiling,
Crying, dancing, (or kissing). I am the mirror from both sides.

I am permanent and I am fleeting. I am she when she is sleeping,
The monster, at night, against the corner wall when she
Is waking. I see everything and I keep nothing.

I watch her drinking and sleeping and keep not one
second's worth tomorrow when she is changing, re-dressing.

I am the mirror from both sides.

In this eveningafternoonmorning with her quaking eyes she has not forgotten me,
but I am always
disregarding.

I am the mirror,
From both sides.

LONG LINES, OUT LOUD, DEAL-WITH-IT THOUGHTS

Michael James Griffin II

long lined poetry really gets my blood boiling because I guess I just intend to find so much more within the segmented phrases and gaps filled with an omission-ary silence to envelop the darkness.

maybe it's just Me?

who can tell these days—when likes and dislikes are like dykes on bikes, anonymous and unanimous, filling the cold, chilly pages of glue.

for Me, poetry is very Wordsworthian—"spontaneous overflow" of the ineluctable modality—fuck auditory, illusory bullshit. sound means nothing without vision?

allusion, illusion, confusion—tripping, blocking, stumbling your way through the history of knowledge—faking making way when all you do is stumble mumble—no sire, I'm sorry—never recede from the boundaries if you wish to exceed/succeed expectation.

don't test the limits if all you want is to live life. that's just plain boring and no fun. getting you no where / some where / any where-but-here fast.

radical sporadical full of bull (shit). no one cares to give a damn about your useless, waste-less existence

follow the rules and toe the line. no quarry to find stones. no glass to break free from—
the noisy smash, the cascading crumble of “errchtchrtch” boom—blank
nothing void. glass or mirror? isn’t that what it’s really about—reflection
inspection all in the wrong direction

singular, unitary, one alone with nothing. painful no mimesis to form the basis of
you-me-I-we-us-they; NO one you who eats from the cup of faith but can’t
believe without proof.

everyone breaks free in death or so the lie belies truth to exclaim and proclaim difference
and makeup the faces of a fake world.

no death in death to show that one is true. absence makes the Heart crumble from heat
and lack of oxygen. plump-plump. no BeAt-bEaT-BEAT no lung’s breath. last
meal air wind gasp sparkle. injection/rejection.

shift, lift soul to heaven from the effect of science on the body—a false place of
dreams and salvation/penetration abnegation. a nowhere, nothing, un-real, not
free—trapping believers to a world, imprisoned by an outcome never to be
realized or experienced.

devoid of truth, reality cedes from the life/strife/wife of the lesbian orb of
Earth/Mother Nature—the measly, wimpy human creatures built from own
raping of a betrothed love.

bouncing, pouncing from place to place race to race sex to sex and more sex the
animal can’t get enough—procreate, recreate, obivate—more, more, more,
smores—chocolate rounds melting smothering hovering killing the disease
ridden, oversexed, undercared for population of thrill seeker couch potato
rejects—denying connection/affection—perpetrating hate and fear depression
should be a lesson never to be taught!

HISTORY'S KEPT SECRET

Lora Sheppard

So they take your freedom:
your life, your rights, your existence.
You detainees deserved it though,
With your beliefs and your faith
And your fanaticism authorizing evil
in the name of your own salvation.

Where is the logic, the understanding?
Lost in a world fractured when it should be
more connected than it was centuries ago;
Here, where death is a button-press away
Bombing and flash and thousands, thousands
gone,
gone,
gone in a world of fire,
in a scorching cleansing that somehow
Nature cannot match, fickle and secret
as she is, the dark side of the world.

People that play God, play with the boundaries
of life and death, and spit in the face of
What Should Be and create their own, deciding
another's fate as if marking off their grocery list.
Check. Another culture dead and gone—buried under
expectations and rules of a mastermind order
that intends to bend others until they break.

Attacks and terrorism on both sides of the coin
With those responsible for crimes awash
on either side refuse see truth.
Trials that go on, farce
as if settled, the dead will rise
to thank those who fought
impossible, impossible,
and freedom is nothing but a rope
that they hold tight between them,
Available for no one.

INVISIBLE

Mary Beth Widhalm

I have a super power.

Maybe it was the years of practice or maybe it was the radiation I was once exposed to, but I have it. It's the one super power I've always wished for above everything (except the ability to read minds). I wished for it harder than I wished to fly.

Invisibility.

Now, I can't just flip a switch and become invisible. Real life super powers aren't like what you see in comic books. It takes tons of concentration and skill, but I can do it. I can be in a crowded room and people just look right through me. I can be in a room with one other person and they don't know I'm there. Maybe you think this is a bad thing. Well. Maybe it is for you. But you just have to figure out how to use these kinds of powers.

It took me years and years to develop and understand my invisibility. I realize now that I started training at a very young age. I learned how to sneak before I learned how to walk. I learned how to whisper before I learned how to talk. I learned how to focus before I learned how to think. I would sneak through the kitchen and out the back door while my mom was cooking dinner. I could walk past the china cabinet that stood on a creaky, wood floor without making a sound. By age seven I began putting my skills to use. I became opaque at the sound of my mom's and sister's raised voices. By age ten I was translucent. By twelve I was nothing but a wisp of hot air.

Over the years my powers have been tested and refined, and I've developed my own simple tricks. I get nervous and sometimes scared around groups of people, so I stand on the edges of the crowd with my arms crossed, hugging my stomach, and I let my hair fall in front of my eyes. I look around from behind my hair like some burglar in the bushes. If anyone happens to see me, then I utilize some prop to make myself look busy - my phone, a book, a notebook. They immediately lose interest.

I don't use my invisibility for the same reasons that I did when I was in high school. Like so many stuck in that place between being a teenager and an adult, I don't hate myself with such fervor, and I'm not quite so terrified of being alive. I have found people to connect with and my body has become an intricate network of strings that stretch across the country—to the boy in Portland who understands when I don't speak, to the girl in Lafayette who understands when I do; to the blues kazoo player in Brooklyn, to the mixed-tape composer in Clemson. It's a constant pulling and a constant balance that has given me the comfort to be visible. Now I can wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and see all these strings and know that I am beautiful because I am tied to one end and they are tied to the other.

Invisibility is a gift and a burden and it must be used with caution. If you always remain invisible, then you will never let anyone tie themselves you, and you will end up tangled in your own strings, fumbling to find the other end but only finding another knot.

COMMON MISTAKES

Charles Waylon Salter

They drank too much Bourbon and smoked too much weed
Many a day, not many more there will be
On Dess Road they had a fine time indeed

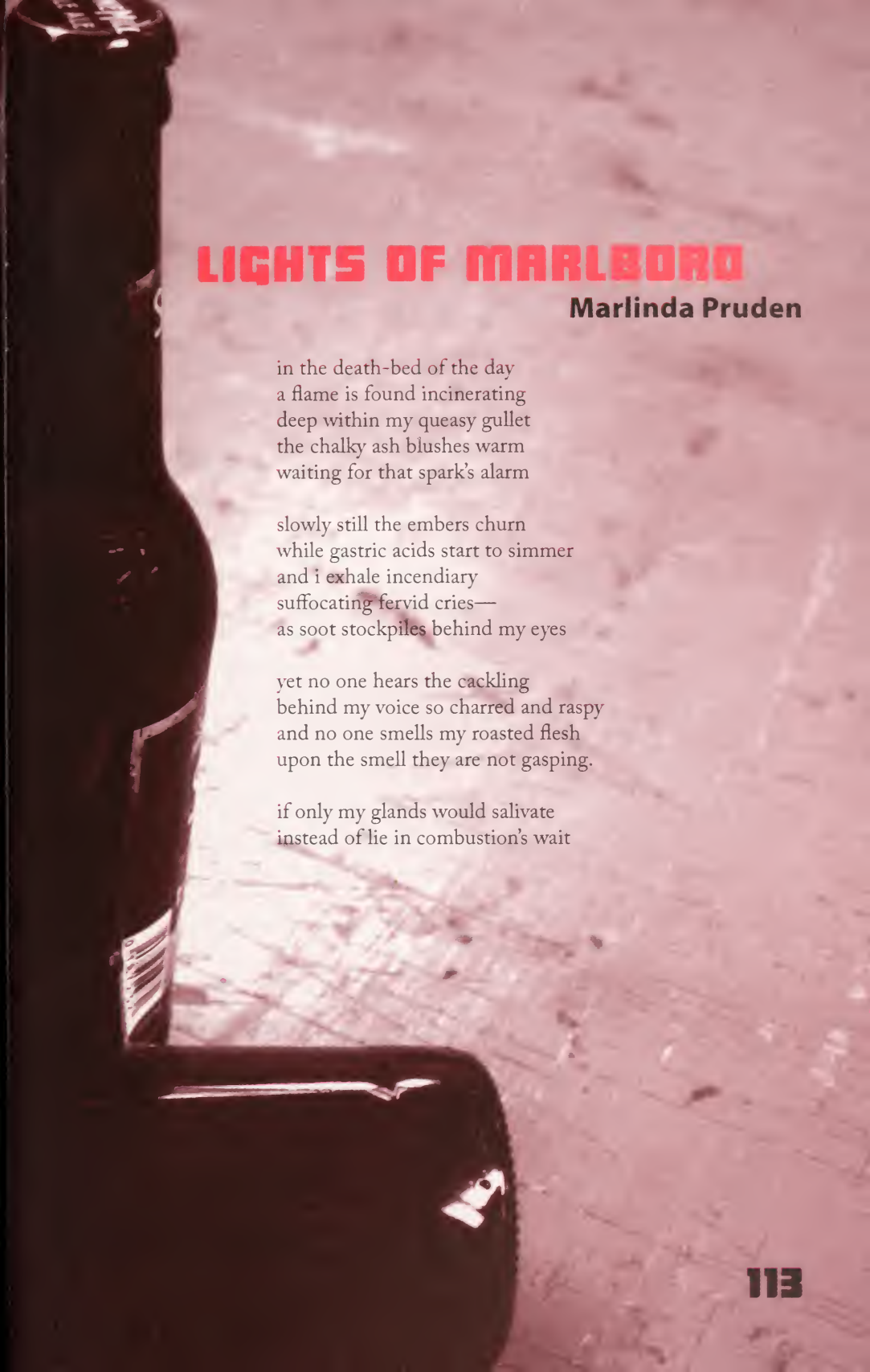
Half ass broke and always in need
A place so beautiful few people will see
They drank too much Bourbon and smoked too much weed

A serious thought neither ever conceived
Worry when you're old, don't you agree
On Dess Road they had a fine time indeed

Each day they'd move over and let youth take the lead
Only once or twice experimented with LSD
They drank too much Bourbon and smoked too much weed

Each had a friend who almost O.D.'ed
But time rolled by like a smooth melody
On Dess Road they had a fine time indeed

Success, wealth, nothing was guaranteed
Away from home both would flee
They drank too much Bourbon and smoked too much weed
On Dess Road they had a fine time indeed



LIGHTS OF MARLBORO

Marlinda Pruden

in the death-bed of the day
a flame is found incinerating
deep within my queasy gullet
the chalky ash blushes warm
waiting for that spark's alarm

slowly still the embers churn
while gastric acids start to simmer
and i exhale incendiary
suffocating fervid cries—
as soot stockpiles behind my eyes

yet no one hears the cackling
behind my voice so charred and raspy
and no one smells my roasted flesh
upon the smell they are not gasping.

if only my glands would salivate
instead of lie in combustion's wait

A MISAPPROPRIATION OF MISINTERPRETATION

Jonathan C. Evans

The sun was just beginning to lower in the Western sky as a group of men gathered for a second time that day. The reason for their having to come “for a second time” revolved heavily on the desire of some of the men to have a lunch break and the “headache” that their teacher had from obtaining said food for them. This group of roughly a dozen or so men, full on fish and chips, gathered on a parse, rocky, partially shaded hill.

However, as this “teacher” spoke once more, he began to notice that not all of his pupils were giving him their undivided attention.

“Teacher,” one of the men spoke up, interrupting the Teacher’s thoughts.

Sighing, the Teacher turned and replied., “Yes, John?”

“Would you say that the conception of God and the universe might be broken down on a metaphysical level? Perhaps a kind of, I don’t know, three in one deal. Aristotle of the Greeks spoke of...”

“John!” the Teacher interrupted abruptly, “What have I told you about over philosophizing the things I have been telling you?”

“Not to do that,” John replied in a sulking voice. “But, Teacher, should we take all that you say in literal fashion?”

“NO!” the Teacher replied, “That’s just ignorant.”

“Yes-master.”

“Good,” the Teacher commented, “You must listen to my meanings, the contexts of the situations. That is the only way you’ll get IT.”

“Why?” John asked rhetorically.

“Hey!” the Teacher jumped back. “What did I just tell you?”

“To quit philosophizing.”

“Exactly, no more of that here, you hear me.”

"Yes, Jesus."

"Good, now, where was I?"

As Jesus pondered his lost place in what he was trying to tell his pupils, one man raised his hand.

"Put your hand down, Judas, I'm not going to tell you that you're going to get rich, it's not going to happen. I have told you the privileges of this are not of the material world."

"Me?" another man spoke up from behind Jesus. "Teacher, I did not raise my hand."

"Not you, Thomas," Jesus turned and glanced at the man with extreme annoyance.

"Remember, I decided that you were going to go by 'Thomas.' It's the same situation with Peter, you know his name was Simon, but I call him 'Peter' as I call you 'Thomas.' Therefore, you need to stop doubting, as I've told you that like, what, a thousand times now. I want the other Judas Iscariot. Jesus Christ, do I have always get so specific with you guys!"

A large gasp went up among all the men at hearing their Teacher's last comment.

"Teacher," Peter spoke up. "You...well...you said your name in vain." A look of confusion flashed across Peter's face as he finished his own sentence.

"Well, no joke, I can do that." Jesus declared in boastful and slightly sarcastic manner, turning a gaze across the scene of the shocked look on all of his pupil's faces. "I mean come on...I'm the son of GOD! It has some privileges believe me."

A hand shot up again from the crowd.

"JUDAS...I mean, ISCARIOT!" Jesus shouted. "Put the hand DOWN!"

"Maybe I should sell you to the authorities," Judas mumbled under his breath.

"What was that?" Jesus replied, tilting his head so that his ear faced Judas. "Did we say something?"

"Nothing, master," Judas responded in a low voice as he continued to pout.

"That's what I thought," Jesus exclaimed gloatingly. "Now, getting back, again, to what I was trying to tell you all like what, twenty minutes ago. Really, do you not all see this, you complain about my sermons being long...'All day, teacher, they go all day,' but this is why, because you all keep interrupting me."

As Jesus ranted, he noticed two of his pupils hunched over in the back, behind Thomas, who continued to persist in shaking his head side-to-side in usual disbelief. Jesus continued speaking as he made his way down between Andrew and Peter, past John and Judas, and finally he reached Thomas. Hunching behind Thomas, trying to stay out of sight, were Matthew and Luke.

"Matthew, Luke," Jesus suddenly yelped in chastisement. "What in Christ's . . . I mean, my good name are you two doing!"

The others again let out a gasp.

"Oh come on," Jesus declared in annoyance as he turned back towards the others. "For my Father's sake I didn't even say my name. Lighten up already."

Turning his attention back to Matthew and Luke, who were trying to take was in their hands and hide it behind their backs. Jesus whirled back around to face them.

"Now, I'll ask again. What are you two doing?"

"Ummm," Matthew fumbled his words, dropping the parchment and pen he was attempting to hide. "I . . . we," he pointed at Luke. "We were . . . taking notes . . . on, you know, the things you were telling us, teaching us."

"Yeah," Luke echoed Matthew. "We were taking down notes on the things you teach

us . . . for the record."

Jesus just stood there for a second. His face displayed a look of shock and confusion and a little disappointment.

"Teacher," Luke began to speak up again.

"Hold it." Jesus stopped him, looking over them as he spoke, "Two things: first off, how in my own name—and none of that gasping," Jesus pointed at the others, "did you two get your hands on parchment and ink? I mean really, do have any idea how expensive that stuff is? It makes no logical sense whatsoever."

Luke glanced at Matthew. "Well, Teacher, I . . . ough . . . we found it?"

"Yes! We found it." Matthew echoed.

"Whatever," Jesus exclaimed with a glance of disbelief. "Give it to me."

"Yes, Teacher," Matthew and Luke spoke in unison as they handed Jesus their parchment.

"Secondly, and more importantly," Jesus declared as they handed him the parchments, "I expected better than you two. Have I not told all of you the level of commitment following me requires?"

Getting no reply, Jesus answered his own question. "Yes, I have. Do you really expect to just become 'fishers of men' and receive the Kingdom of Heaven without effort? No. You have to earn it and you have to be committed, willing to put to memory and action what I tell you. I mean really, this would not be the greatest story ever told if it didn't require a some effort, now would it?"

"Why Teacher?" Matthew asked.

"Well," John interjected, "You know, Teacher, perhaps you shouldn't be so hard on them. Socrates never wrote down any of what he said. His students did that instead."

"Ughhh." Jesus exhaled in frustration, turning a brief glare at John and then returning his attention to Matthew. "Okay . . . it's all about living this life, treating others right, and taking care of each other despite your pasts or origins. It's not about petty, dumb little issues, or making money. The whole point is to strive for the betterment of humanity."

"You mean like the Romans claim," Matthew interjected, "To unite the world under one central power."

"No! Look, you still don't get it. Think of it more like the way Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. lived their lives."

"Who?" The entire group spoke up together.

"Nothing," Jesus recovered quickly. "Nothing, you're not ready for that yet."

"What are you trying to tell us, Teacher?" Peter asked.

"Well, before I was interrupted, I was trying to tell you how to bring world peace and the Kingdom of Heaven to being on Earth while converting the Romans to the faith and finding unity and brotherhood with all men upon the planet."

"Oh," Peter replied, "yeah, that."

* * *

50 Years Later

"Matthew?" Luke called out, his voice giving out a bit from age.

"YEAH!" Matthew yelled back due to his hard hearing.

"Matthew, do you remember that stuff the Teacher told us that day, you know, on that parse, rocky, and partially shaded hill top?"

"There were a lot of those!"

"Ummm, yeah," Luke scratched his head. "You're right. But there was that one time . . . it was something really important."

"Well, he shouldn't have taken our parchment, then!"

"True. I wish I could remember. Oh well, I guess I'll make it up—won't be the first time."

"Yeah, really! I can't remember most of it! I've just been filling in the gaps with made up junk!"

"Me too!" Luke looked down at his pages before him. "Fudge it. Let's see . . . oooh, this would be a great section for revising the Ten Commandments, and I like two over ten anyway."

"YEAH!" Matthew yelled again. "Get rid of that bit on stealing! I need to pad my resume for heaven!"

"Hahaha!" Luke laughed and began to write again.





MORNING DEW

Amber Istre

A LEAF CAUGHT IN A WINDSHIELD WIPER

Ben Bouchie

The headlights illuminated the road, exposing the seeming void that the truck roared toward at every turn. The road always materialized into being and found itself guiding them safely through the countryside. Joshua slept peacefully on the opposite side of the cab as Sean navigated through the sprinkling of rain that drifted down from the sky. The hum of the engine, the blowing of wind, and the repetitive scraping of the windshield wipers gracefully combined into a soundtrack that pulled softly down on his eyelids. The air conditioning sent a chill throughout the cabin of the truck, and Joshua shivered into a tightly curled ball in his seat.

The endless road kept stretching out underneath them like a concrete treadmill. Sean tiredly inhaled and tried to straighten himself up. He jerked the steering wheel ever so slightly back and forth. Joshua's eyes flickered as he stirred and took in a deep, nasally breath.

Sean looked over at his son and smiled a nervous, fatherly smile. He deeply envied the child's effortless existence and felt an overwhelming regret at having ever matured to his current age.

A pair of lights approached and sped past them into the darkness that had enveloped the world behind. Sean mused over the destination of the disappearing phantom car. Was there anywhere to go in a pitch that shrouded everything from sight? Where was he, himself headed? Home. To the security of his bolt locks and the warmth of his wife's flesh.

A rapid flapping caught his eye in the windshield wiper as it oscillated over the thick glass. A leaf had caught itself in the wipers.

A streak smeared across the windshield in a perfect curve behind the wiper. Sean peered closer. It was no leaf.

A large moth trying to find its way through the black rain drifted toward the shining

orbs that were ahead of it. Seeming safety had approached much faster than its wings could possibly carry it. It didn't even have the ability to register that something was amiss, nor did it have time for any sense of pain.

His eyes widened as Sean realized what was caught in his wipers. He followed the moth as it slid over the glass leaving a line of its life juices across the windshield. A shiver ran down his spine. He glanced over at his child to see if he had seen anything. Joshua still slept complacently in his seat.

Sean clicked a knob, and the speed of the wipers increased. His finger found the button to spray a light mist onto the windshield. He watched as the wings of the moth beat furiously in the wind. They seemed like shaking fists. He cranked the speed of the wipers to their full potential and waited uneasily for the creature to escape its bonds. He couldn't tell whether the insect was frantically struggling to escape from forces it could never comprehend or was simply lying dead on the window, resigned to battery by circumstances much greater than itself.

Finally, the large form of the moth shifted and was blown from the windshield. A dark shape flew past Sean's window, and he craned his neck backward as the moth was flung into the nothingness.

He returned his eyes to the stretching road ahead and let out a breath. His neck twisted, releasing air between the joints, making soft pops deep within him. He glanced over at his son's slumbering body and smiled a shaken, uneasy smile. The child unconsciously moved his position in the seat and exposed a large, yellowish bruise in the stages of healing. Sean looked away and gazed at the road. A convulsive shake went through him.

Why was the moth bothering him so?

The wipers continued their constant motion in front of him. He closed his eyes and dug into them with his forefinger and thumb. The powerful rubbing massaged them and fought back a fraction of the tiredness hiding behind his eyes.

His eyelids parted, and again he was confronted by the sight and sounds of the windshield wipers. He looked at the spot where the moth had been caught and leaned in close to see the shape of his son caught between the pieces of the bloodthirsty wiper.

Joshua's arms flapped in panicked spasms and his mouth opened in unheard cries. The wiper mercilessly dragged him over the glass, leaving a red trail behind it.

Sean's eyes widened as he quickly clicked the wipers off. He took in a breath and closed his eyes. The truck blindly sped down the straight, country road while he composed himself. He looked warily at Joshua, who still continued to sleep. Sean's eyes readjusted and he looked at the road before him. The windshield remained spotless as it redirected the oncoming wind, and he noticed that the rain had stopped.



Argus office

